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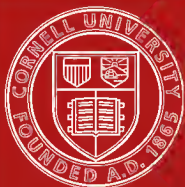
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A RELUCTANT ADAM



WALDO STRONG

A RELUCTANT ADAM

BY

SIDNEY WILLIAMS



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CHAPTER I

STRONG'S earliest memory was not of his birthplace, a sleepy town by the sea. It was a memory of an inland village sunning itself in recollection of stage-coaches that filled its streets with flourishes of the horn before the railroad came. After that most strangers beheld Lyme only from a car window. Its public monuments were a court-house and a jail.

The tarnished glory of good families going to seed; presumption of the prosperous grocer, who was also the undertaker; the affable condescension of a politician once sent to the legislature; windy rhetoric of a blacksmith always shouting against "the ring," — these and kindred interests had once bulked large in Strong's mind; fragmentarily they came again.

He could remember the "Yellow Day" that bathed all in a murky light. For on that day budded his first love affair. The woman began it. He was six and she was sixteen. As Strong recalled her in later years, a stout woman of indefinite figure and *passé* complexion, absorbed in church and her children, it seemed to him that she must have been a rather buxom girl with no particular charm beyond the freshness of healthy youth. But he could still remember a brown merino she wore, and hair-

ribbons of brown that matched the fat pony she drove.

Acquaintance came with dazzling suddenness. He was peering through the gate, as he had watched many times before, hoping for her appearance in the yard across the street. It was singular that she drove that morning, for the yellow light kept men from their tasks and drove women to prayer. But the girl was willful, and capricious to boot. She had a sweetheart, a lawyer's son who wore a high collar topped by a rather low order of intelligence. He was temporarily indifferent. Phenomena of nature absorbed him to the exclusion of love.

So Strong rode behind the fat pony, blissfully laying upon his divinity's arm a confiding hand. It was the first of many rides that continued until his parents moved to another section, and desolation transiently tenanted his heart. He remembered how he still daily took his stand by the garden gate. A few times she came, but he was no longer "the boy across the way."

He did not sorrow long. After the girl in brown came the daughter of a doctor who wore a top hat and played the violin, thus moving to suspicion shrewd citizens of Lyme. They averred they "would n't have him for a cat," and they seldom had him for their families. His daughter was musical, too. But she sang in a church choir, thus propitiating God and society. She was a petite girl, with gray eyes and a rather roguish mouth. Strong remem-

bered distinctly how her mouth turned up at the corners when she smiled. Her name was Maude.

Passion for Maude was also due to the initiative of the "softer sex." At a picnic she took Strong with unceremonious freedom of an elder, and used him as a shield against a glowering young man. Pickles and ice cream are dear to youth, but what is food to Helen's smile? He would not even wade in a brook, since beauty required his aid. Thus began a period of undisguised devotion.

On Sunday morning it was no longer necessary to force him into Sabbath clothes. For the minister in his pulpit he had no eyes. He was always maneuvering to catch a glimpse of the choir. And when Maude sang he was almost breathless with rapture. She became a bookkeeper and married a traveling salesman. But no other singer ever thrilled him as she did in "With Verdure Clad." Certain works of music he associated with other persons. He always visualized in Liszt's "Second Rhapsodie" a girl who was dead; and her fingers were animate again whenever he heard Chopin's "A-flat Polonaise."

It was not unnatural that he took their attachment more seriously than Maude. When the traveling salesman appeared, quasi-maternal interest languished until its offended recipient deliberately turned his back. The heart of man is less easily touched than his pride.

Youth seeks a protector, while old age hunts an excuse. Strong's next fancy was conventional.

What boy has not worshiped his teacher? Emma was the name of Strong's adored one. She played the banjo in her boarding-house, and wore silk stockings that scandalized economical housewives of Lyme. When she was gone Strong turned to politics for solace, and protection against disloyalty to one of peerless worth.

CHAPTER II

STRONG loved in pinafores. He worshiped in the first arrogance of knickerbockers and linen collar. Then tender passion retreated from his bosom, and reason entered in. He fixed his eyes on dizzy heights, and no woman with soft eyes awaited on the highest pinnacle.

In that pre-adolescent period began a feeling of strangeness that persisted for many years. Some quirk of nature deprived him of hearty, care-free youth. Not that he was a milksop. Lithe and active, though not strong, he played at least an average part in boyish sports. Later, and near the end of his intimate contact with Lyme, he even managed a baseball nine that went forth to play the proud flower of neighboring villages. That was glory, to be sure, but of the budding masculinity of Lyme he never felt himself a part. Skating on a river fascinatingly prolific in air holes; coasting on the crooked road that descended a high hill called "The Mountain," with an unguarded railroad crossing at the foot; running foot-races and trading jack-knives, — these and related interests never seemed to him the most important things in life.

While boys of normal instincts and energy, as it seemed to Strong in retrospect, raced through the streets, shooting marbles or stoning dogs, he culti-

vated the acquaintance of politicians and lawyers, or men who were both. At times in Lyme they abounded in numbers disproportionate to its size. For it was the county seat, with trial sessions of civil and criminal courts. It was not a brilliant bar, but had a representative percentage of Yankee shrewdness, with some equipped for a greater sphere. Strong saw them in the court-room, sparring with professional fierceness for the liberty or purse of a client; and he heard their banter in hours of ease, when even the judge, personified dignity and wisdom upon the bench, relaxed to anecdote based upon some episode of politics or legal practice. It was not elevating conversation and procedure, yet in a sense it was broadening. It opened to a boy's mind avenues of thought seldom suggested to a fledgling.

Such associations were strange for a boy. Strong wondered afterwards at his parents' indifference to them. Perhaps they tacitly shifted responsibility to the shoulders of his only intimate, the clerk of courts. The clerk was a young man, an active and adroit politician. When he had shouldered his own way for a while in the world, Strong still wondered at his patient and resourceful ingenuity. He was the political dictator of Lyme, and the ruling spirit of a dominant county ring. In his back office, where iron door and shutter guarded records against fire, were made and unmade public officials to the eye far more puissant than the clerk. And through his outer office passed the humbler heeler, the man in

quest of a modest loan, the widow with a pension voucher, the miscellaneous bore. And the clerk was usually affable, seldom impatient, professionally helpful.

With fancy's eye Strong could see him still in his favorite attitude, a cigar in his mouth, and his feet, always neatly shod, elevated to the top of his desk. He could smoke and chew gum, and sustain animated conversation with ease. Such were his leisure hours. Strong remembered him also in the fray, when he suavely manipulated supposedly independent citizens of Lyme, or buttonholed and harangued with manifest elation in some turbulent county or district convention. He loved politics as some priests love God.

It was as the suitor of a village belle who made Strong her train-bearer for a time that Dewey, the clerk, first met him. What the man fancied in the boy Strong never knew; we are so veiled to ourselves. But soon he became to callers at the clerk's office almost as familiar as the fixtures. Had it been possible he would have kept counting-room hours, for he knew no keener pleasure than wielding the county seal or holding copy on some judicial record. He browsed in Blackstone and Coke, and struggled with distinctions of replevin and tort before he knew a Latin verb. And when logs blazed in the winter twilight he saw himself a forensic champion of the bar.

That he was destined to eminence in those days

seemed certain to him. Dewey often slapped him on the shoulder, with the same jocular remark, "You're bound to get there." And Dewey's most intimate friend, who was somebody's secretary in Washington, would say, judicially stroking his beard, "Keep on, Waldo, and we'll be proud to know you." He was generally regarded with approval by his elders who did not regard him with indifference, which was the general attitude of youngsters of his own age.

Though sealed to glory, he was not happy. Long after, review of his youth recalled but a single burst of absolute rapture. It had nothing to do with conjugation of *amo*. It was inrushing communion with God. At least, so it seemed. After many years the experience was still fresh in memory. For there came no other hour in which a lark sang within his breast, as it did that night he yielded to the Heavenly Father, personified in a traveling evangelist.

Revival meetings were as much a part of the social life of Lyme as sessions of the Grange, Masonic meetings, and deliberations of the "Independent Order of Good Templars," who were vowed to sobriety and addicted to recitation and song. A revival was vastly more interesting than these, because it was more dramatic. Its converts were seldom constant. What is born of frenzy is not anchored in the soul. But for a time it freed the New Englander from the clutch of temperament that is lack of temperament. There was always a woman

with a velvety contralto, or a wailing tenor to supplement lurid depiction of glories of Paradise and the pangs of hell with some tear-soaked song. Strong remembered "Beckoning Hands" as the most reliable stimulant to religious impulse.

His own conversion was less a triumph for the evangelist than a result of a mischievous activity of a youth who prodded him with a pin, at the moment of a last call to those that wished to be saved. Indefinite yearning had not flowered in fervor when he was thus shocked to suppliant pose. But he went forward with the freshly wounded, and his own heart was inexplicably pierced. Until he slept that night he kept the jubilant wonder of a transformed world. Next morning it had vanished, but there remained tenderness blanketing mankind.

The days of his avowed piety were not long. He was never baptized. He never joined a church. To Lyme's moral censors, he was a normal backslider. Rather it was reassertion of reticence that screened and atrophied emotional impulse. The last phase of piety was prayer for his success in school. He dropped that when it occurred to him that it was degrading to use God as a substitute for brains.

When he had reached man's estate it seemed singular to him that one destined to accomplish little should have been plagued so much. With wrestlings of the spirit, fledglings of genius test their fiber. Strong never felt himself one of nature's anointed. Sense of proportion, that later handicapped him

when careless assurance might have achieved the goal, forbade such confusion of rank. But he mentally revolted against environment and strongly resented the proximity of comfortable, commonplace persons who regarded constraint as a sign he was "queer." He was still without intimates of his own age.

He liked to get away from the village, not so much seeking charms of wood and field as desiring to be alone. The railroad was his favorite path. Vaguely, it seemed a connection with the desirable beyond; and there was no obstacle to reflection in uniformity of tie and shining ribbons of steel.

Sometimes he saw young lovers strolling hand-in-hand, and the sight intensified loneliness without breeding envy. They seemed different from himself, almost like creatures of another species. The common period of sex perception imperfectly understood left him unattached to the individual. Not that he was ignored. Indifference is the sharpest lance in the lists of love. Temperament exempted him from the lesson many with much experience never learn, — that indifference would pique St. Catherine herself.

A girl who took to corsets at an earlier age than was common among maids of Lyme, and wore French-heeled slippers equally progressive, embarrassed him with invitations to become her partner in the osculatory pastime of "Drop-the-handkerchief," until she turned with resentment to a more

admiring and appreciative youth. Also a gaunt girl with blue eyes pestered him with *billets-doux*. Later she became a librarian and died of tuberculosis. Certainly he was not responsible for that.

Neglect of girls and comparative indifference to sports did not make Strong a remarkable student. What he did not like he did not vigorously undertake. Mathematics and natural science found him unreceptive. The allurements of language were less than the convenience of an interlinear "horse." A red-haired girl of vigorous intellect and physique stood first when members of his class with due solemnity took their departure from the Lyme High School. That was a shock to the clerk, whose astonishment wounded Strong's self-esteem. He did not shine in graduating. His oration on "The Conqueror" contained no quips appetizing to a perspiring audience on a hot June night, and he was at once too diffident and indifferent to seek to brush a veil of tolerance away. To him the sole pleasure of the occasion was in the prospect of early escape from an unpleasant community.

He did not wait to share in distribution of stereotyped congratulations, or to be a bearer of refreshments and partner to derelicts at the graduation ball. Escaping by a window, he hurried to the neighboring cemetery, and established himself on its wall. It was not a cozy place, but he preferred it to the hall. Neither the night breeze in sepulchral pianissimo, nor occasional agitation in trees spread

protectively above the quiet dead, gave him any concern. Row on row rested before him those who had lived the great adventure of life and experienced the supreme romance of death. For them dreamless peace or the keen joy of untrammeled spirits. He envied them more than he envied any one in the brightly lighted hall. Through an open window came the resonant blating of a cornet preliminary to vigorous scraping of feet. Dropping from his perch, he walked vigorously away from what by common rule should have been the culminant triumph of his early youth.

CHAPTER III

FORTUNATE the soul that feels a positive need. The problem of his immediate future produced in Strong a sort of mental *mal de mer*. There was law, a ladder of glory, in the distance; but he was too young to read for the bar. The suggestion of college he resisted. He was still out of tune with his age. Egoism mistaken for exaltation wrapped him in cotton-wool. To his parents he was a puzzle they patiently essayed to solve. They fitted well enough into Lyme's scheme of existence. His father was a stalwart Republican, a respectable merchant who had been a selectman. His mother, who cherished him with unreasoning love, was a capable housewife and spiritually blessed with a degree of piety deemed orthodox. Nobody could blame them for Strong's singular characteristics. Since they were not progressive enough to indulge in speculation on a "throw-back," sages of the town contented themselves with the observation, "It beats all."

His father was indulgent, but he, too, had crotchets of conscience. To a typical New Englander idleness is worse than deplorable: it is disreputable. If Strong was too young for the bar, and too stubborn to be railroaded to college, he must go to work. The announcement was made quite casually, as offhand dinner talk. And with equal air of unconcern was

added the statement that employment awaited his son in Cocheeco, where an uncle was superintendent of a shoe factory. Strong's mother registered tearful protest. Strong himself offered no objection at all. Getting away from Lyme was more important to him than getting into any other place, and he had no fear of being permanently chained to the wheels of industry.

Lyme lacked even a weekly newspaper to announce that "Our esteemed young citizen, Waldo Strong, has accepted a position of promise in Cocheeco." But it had the grapevine telegraph, which gives much speedier service. In the remaining days before his departure Strong was made to feel that he had risen in public estimation as a fellow going to earn his salt. Of such approval he was scornful.

He staged his departure with elaborate care. It was not enough to stroll to the station like one merely bent on seeing the train come in. He nerved himself to impassiveness in his mother's embrace and, making haste to seat himself at a window, buried his face in a newspaper with *blasé* air. But when a turn in a cut shut off the last view of Lyme he felt suddenly weak and lonely. It was not that Lyme became dear, but Cocheeco took on the ominous look of the unknown to the inexperienced. His uncle, too, was a stranger in all but perfunctory acquaintance. His relatives in general Strong relished a little less than the public he had known.

CHAPTER IV

COCHEECO was an old town containing conspicuously discordant elements. The passenger alighting from a train could see on one side the chapel spire and clustering roofs of Cocheeco Academy, the Eton of New England. Founded by a philanthropic merchant of the seventeenth century, it had lived to what passed for venerable age in a young country. And with age came increasing strength. It had accumulated ivy and traditions. Its roll of graduates embraced men of lustrous repute.

To the outside world, Cocheeco was an "academy town." Professors sat on the platform as "prominent citizens" at political rallies. They uttered the customary inanities of a chairman at lyceum lectures. They were vestrymen and deacons, and their women-folk gave requisite tone to germans, literary societies, and ramifications of church aid.

With the Academy people solid citizens of the town were socially classed: a few lawyers, a few more doctors, merchants, and the manufacturers. These latter were admitted to the society of the intellectual élite because pundits required somebody to be human with after playing before pupils the plaster god; and because they had daughters relied upon to save Academy boys from fascinations of mill Delilahs.

On one side the Academy settlement, with its spacious campus, green in summer and generally white in winter; and beyond, the pleasant prospect of wide, generously shaded streets flanked by houses modified Colonial in dominant type. And there was just a glimpse of the river that wandered crookedly — sometimes narrow and again expanded to broad shallows — through the town.

Even coins are seldom equally attractive on both sides. From contemplation of serene prosperity and scholastic calm the stranger turned to a section rough in the rush of industrial activity. Erections of brick with towering chimneys all day long discharged billows of smoke, that carpeted adjacent acres with cinders until their complexion was like a coal-heaver's cheek. And beyond the factories, plains planted with tenements and cottages seeming perpetually engaged in obeisance to some overbearing force that furnished their occupants work.

Sometimes at sunrise, sometimes when it was still dark, and always a quarter before the hour of seven, hoarse whistles warned hurrying mill hands to gulp the last swallow of coffee, bolt the last mouthful of bread, and reach hurriedly for garments donned on the way to the door. They streamed along converging streets to the factories, most of them silent and more of them dull. The stream thinned to rivulets that lightened to stragglers, and presently the doors were closed with a bang. It was seven when

a sharp blast of the whistle sounded a prelude to the gathering hum of machinery.

It was the grubbing Cocheeco that Strong was to know. If there was any possible advantage in being the nephew of the superintendent of Wardle Bros.' factory for the manufacture of "Ladies' and Misses' Fine Footwear," he never found it out. There was something disconcerting in his uncle's greeting the night of his arrival.

"Hullo!" he said, with a perfunctory handshake. "So you've come down to work."

The precise significance of "down" was not clear to Strong. Later he understood. It was soon evident that overseers of Wardle Bros. had no instructions to spare the superintendent's nephew. That they were licensed to harry him Strong became convinced. Some youths would have rejoiced in employment that took them from branch to branch of a great business; but he saw nothing beautiful or absorbing in the manufacture of shoes.

He resented the checking of employees like cattle in a packing-house on the way to slaughter. He detested the odor of leather, kid and calf alike. He was offended by the rough pleasantries of men and embarrassed by the careless tongues of women. He did not try to adapt himself to environment. Studiously alien, he nourished discontent. His uncle regarded him with satirical amusement.

A solitary figure in the factory, Strong was far from sociable in his uncle's home. Prepared to pre-

sent him in Cocheeco's society, his relatives were not sufficiently interested to break down his reserve. For love of his cousin, a genteel blonde who played Nevin's "Narcissus" prettily and made palatable fudge, an Academy boy would have opened to him small beer of sport enjoyed by youth aping airs of men. But Strong snubbed him, and kept on extracting sour satisfaction from loneliness.

Winter went out with dragging chains. Then the work day became a little less odious. Near where the river parted from the town was an inlet sheltered by pines. At rest when the sun shone warm, one saw broad, green meadows and fat farm lands with blue hills beyond. Starlight disclosed no details, but invested with immensity the quiet scene. It was an excellent spot in which to stage a performance of self-pity, and Strong had it alone.

It was his alone until an evening in May. He had strolled up the hillside by a winding path, walking unseeing in familiar ways. There was a rustic seat in the shade of a giant pine, pleasantly secluded by day and beyond observation of the stranger at night. Coming softly over needles of pine, he had no intimation of another's presence until something started up suddenly, almost at his feet. By a faint rustle he realized it was a woman and hastened to dispel alarm.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "I did n't know anybody was here."

"And I did n't think," she offered, "that any one would come."

Whatever she had felt at Strong's sudden appearance, her voice was steady now. He liked its timbre, a slightly husky richness, and a little retard that contained no hint of timidity. Still indistinct in the darkness, she turned to go. Instinctively he extended a detaining hand.

"Don't let me drive you out," he begged.

"But this is your place."

"Then let me share it with you."

She laughed lightly. "How romantic. 'Ships that pass in the night.'"

"Why not speak each other in passing?"

"Very well," she said, and he sensed indifference. "Then let's sit down."

For a minute or so there was silence, save for indefinite sounds of sleeping nature. Each saw the other, as a vaguely human shape. Again the woman led:—

"We're like 'Two Babes in the Wood,' or rather, Two Babes in the Dark. And there's nobody to introduce us. Why not introduce ourselves?"

"It's a go. Ladies first."

"And make it really odd by doing it descriptively. Better still, do it for each other."

She laughed again and Strong chimed in. They were on comfortable terms, two strangers in the dark.

"Still ladies first," he said. "Please begin."

"Miss Nobody, allow me to present Mr. Somebody. He is a tall, thinnish boy, somewhat under twenty, with brown, wavy hair, blue eyes that might be more cheerful if he were on the lookout for pleas-

ant things, a nose nearly Roman, and a mouth that ought to turn up at the corners, but does n't. General appearance, slightly stand-offish. If he refuses to answer this description, wait until daylight to identify him."

"He does n't refuse," said Strong, after a moment charged with interrogation. "I suppose it's a fair description. But how do you know? Where have we met before?"

She parried with counter-question.

"Don't you remember people you meet every day?"

"Of course," he said with a touch of impatience.

"But where have I seen you? You are n't—?"

"Yes, I am," she admitted cheerfully. "I'm one of the factory girls."

"You don't seem —" He paused again, and the night covered his blush of embarrassment.

"Like a frowsy, unrefined young female. Thanks." She was mistress of the situation, and frankly amused. "Perhaps I ought to explain a little. That is, if you don't wish to introduce me to myself."

"How can I," he said, "when I've never seen you?"

"Then confession first. I was n't truthful when I said I did n't expect to be disturbed. I knew you came here, for I had seen you. I am fond of the river bank, too. And I came because I wanted to meet you. Are you shocked?"

"No," he said. "But why?"

The situation was beyond him. He swam in strange waters.

“Because I wanted to help you. Don’t frown, because I can’t see you, and it’s thrown away. I’m a whimsical person. That’s why I’m a grass widow, and a clerk in Wardle Bros.’ office. What is it Flora Wiggins says in ‘The College Widow’? Oh, — ‘Don’t have nothing to do with no students.’ I eloped with one and his parents had the marriage annulled. There was nothing scandalous, and I was as young as he. But all the same I’m ‘damaged goods.’ Flossy is my name, Flossy Nash. Mention it to your prim cousin, and she’ll roll her eyes appropriately.

“Social missionary work,” she went on, “isn’t much in my line. But you’re such a lonesome boy. Don’t edge away. This is pure philanthropy. You don’t know which one of Wardle’s office ornaments I am, but every day I’ve seen you coming and going, and you’re a map of loneliness. I ought to recognize it. I’ve had plenty of experience since I made my mistake. But nobody’s had a chance to pity me. And that’s what I want to say to you. It isn’t enough to keep a stiff upper lip. Twist your mouth into a smile. In faking jolliness sometimes you’ll do so well you’ll forget it is n’t real. It pays, because people like you better for it, and it’s up to us to make the best of what comes our way.”

She seemed to brood a moment, then continued briskly:—

“Of course you’ll wonder why I took the trouble to come here and wait for you, and lie to you, and

talk to you like a grandmother. I could n't tell myself. Maybe it was because you're the least fresh boy I've seen in years. Maybe it's because you remind me of somebody. But you'll believe what I said, won't you?"

She leaned towards him suddenly, and placed upon his arm a persuasive hand. He suffered it passively. He was a little bewildered. An adventure had somehow turned into a sort of kindergarten experience, with himself the pupil.

"Thank you," he said a little stiffly. "I'll try to remember."

"Good. Then let's go." She rose, suiting action to word, and he followed silently. A few commonplaces were uttered as they sauntered down the hill to a marginal street with straggling houses and more straggling lights. At the foot of the hill she left him unceremoniously. Almost before he realized it she had said "Good-bye" and turned away. He had only a glimpse of her face in the feeble light of a neighboring lamp. It seemed to him that she was dark, both her hair and eyes, and he gathered that she was slight of figure as she walked rapidly into engulfing darkness.

Would he know her by daylight? For the first time since his arrival in Cocheeco the factory of Wardle Bros. seemed other than a place of oppression. A feeling of companionship warmed his heart. He whistled a little as he walked.

Next morning he was impatient for his first er-

rand. It was not invoices that he thought of as he bore them with rather more than his usual tardiness to the manager's desk. To right and left were women, most of them young: stenographers, bookkeepers, miscellaneous clerks. Strong surveyed them with an interest he had never displayed before, and presently he was rewarded. Just how he determined he could not have told, but he confidently identified a girl who sat fingering the pages of a ledger. She was neither handsome nor particularly striking, save in a wealth of jet-black hair that waved uncontrollably, and her violet eyes. They had a way of bursting into flame, as Strong discovered when she half turned to meet his stare with a sudden crinkling smile. It was his face that reddened as he turned away without even a nod, and he heard a titter succeeding a flippant remark: —

“Flossy has a crush on Parsifal.”

That night when the whistle blew he took his stand at the main entrance and scanned the human tide. It passed the zenith before she came. He struggled through to her, and she smiled again as he lifted his hat.

“So you found me out,” she said.

“Of course,” he answered. “Did n’t you think I would?”

“I did n’t know. Not many men take to advice, and they all take to admiration.”

“You were good to me,” he said simply. “Will you be my friend?”

She was smiling again, and her eyes were brilliant.
"Do you need my maternal guidance?"

Her tone was flippant, but he did not feel himself rebuffed.

"May I see you to-night?" he persisted.

"What a sudden boy. Do you really want to see me?"

"Have n't I asked you?"

"Then, maybe. It will be by the river, if I come. Don't lose any beauty sleep waiting. We separate here. Good-bye!" And she was gone.

She came that night, and other nights. Together they watched the waxing and waning of the May moon. And Strong opened his heart. It was characterized as much by what was lacking of the natural increment of youth as by what it contained of positive value. He had neither the *verve* of inexperience nor the poise of seasoned age. That they talked mostly of his aspirations was not strange. Mental and moral equipment are worn as plumage by the male of thinking age. Strong unbosomed himself the more freely because no confidence was required. Flossy took what was offered and returned it with humorous embellishment. She was flippant, but not foolish. Under stimulus of gay companionship Strong discovered within himself a vein of levity. It would never be pronounced, but it was there to tap.

The tryst of the pine was all they had. "It would spoil the charm," she said, when Strong, feel-

ing himself remiss, urged upon her small coin of social currency. At Wardle's she gave him no more than a nod. His relatives took his cheerful demeanor as a sign of awakening interest in Cocheeco's charms.

Platonic friendship is interest in which sex instinct is not obtrusive. Of Flossy as a woman Strong had no analytic thought. But he responded instinctively to her racy appeal. Evenings too short left him with a feeling of elation he did not dissect. What Flossy's feeling for him was Strong never felt certain. Of more than friendship there was no word or act until the night he told her he was going away. He kept the news until the evening was far spent, then told her abruptly.

The clerk, who knew his aversion to Wardle's, both from what he had written and what he had not, appeared as an angel of deliverance offering a position as teacher in Bellhaven. It was not much, he wrote, for Bellhaven was small, and the vacancy only for the rest of the year. "But," he added, "the Superintendent of Schools is a friend of mine, and you may make a good teacher. I'm satisfied you're a failure in the making of shoes. Your father consents. If you want to change, write or wire Aaron Keay, Bellhaven."

He had telephoned instead, and five minutes sufficed for arrangement of terms. Flossy was animated in friendly interest and eager for details. They talked of the relief it would be for him; of his

plans for the future. At length such conversation languished and silence settled between them. For the first time in their acquaintance Strong felt constraint. It was but brief, for Flossy started suddenly.

"Come," she said with a little laugh, "it's getting late, and teachers must set a good example. With your solemn air, you'll be a pattern of deportment. But you're not a teacher yet. I'll race you to the foot of the hill."

She was off at top speed, and Strong followed somewhat leisurely, reserving triumph for the finish. In the moonlight he caught the flash of her eye as she half turned to see how closely she was pursued. Then she stumbled and fell. He was beside her in a moment, and stooped to her assistance. His arms about her, she leaned against him, breathing unsteadily. A sudden impulse possessed him. The compassionate moon, the dim landscape, all was blotted out. He found her lips. There was full response, but suddenly she lay inert in his arms, then struggled to be free. With desperate energy she thrust him from her.

"Flossy —" he said unsteadily.

"Oh, you dear fool," she murmured, and there were tears in her voice. "You've kissed me, boy, and I've given you to the world."

"I don't understand," he said confusedly.

"Some time you will." She was mistress of her voice, save that effort was evident. "You'll re-

member, and then you 'll forget. But keep it while you can. Now, go, please."

His hesitation was destructive to self-control.

"Can't you see!" she cried. "Won't you go!"

She was facing him now, and he saw her face distorted with pain. Slowly he turned away. He heard her sob, and quickened his steps.

Next morning he left Cocheeco.

CHAPTER V

BELLHAVEN was strung from the "Crick" to the "Neck." It was long and narrow and devoted to agriculture and fishing, save in a medial section that thrived on summer boarders. With the pioneer's feeling for broad spaces, first settlers had planted their houses on the bank of a broad, swift river that still ran salt and free, mingling its water with the ocean. The river's integrity was unimpaired. As much could not be said for Bellhaven's people. They suspected what they did not understand, and understood little beyond their range of personal observation. Wedded to the past, they were blind to the future. To them the hard-shell New Englander was the only real American.

Such was Bellhaven's normal state. In summer it was surprisingly transfigured. For the tie of nativity, possibly supplemented by freakish humor, moved Madame Berenson, who journeyed to Acre that she might lay at the feet of the Bab a fortune made in petroleum, to establish in the midst of Bellhaven the most cosmopolitan conference America had ever known.

Some inkling of curiosities in store came to Strong on his way from the Bellhaven station, which was a small receptacle for passengers deposited in a stretch of clayey soil. The station agent, telegraph

operator, baggage master, and postmaster, too, hustled about in his shirt-sleeves, with an overloaded fountain pen staining his ear. Hesitating to address this bustling functionary, Strong was himself hailed by a small man whose slouch hat inclined a little to his left ear, and thus heightened a rather jocund air. He had twinkling eyes, pale blue, a reddish nose, and a goatee that somehow contributed to the general gayety of his appearance. All this Strong noted, for, saving the station, there was little else to see.

"I guess you're the new teacher for No. 2," said the little man breezily. "At least I don't see anybody else that can be. Mr. Keay sent me to get you. My name's French. Believe yours is Strong."

"Since you're so well posted, perhaps you can tell me where I'm going."

Dignity was wasted on this blindly affable person.

"Guess you're coming with me, unless you got plans of your own. Mr. Keay thought you'd like it with us. We make a kind of business of boarding in summer, and most any time we take people in. Don't hear you say no, so I guess you don't object. Give me your check. Be under way in no time."

French's nag was far from volatile, but French himself rattled on like a windmill. "Hope you'll like us and stay awhile, though I can't say you'll fancy many of the women at the house. They're left-overs, most of them: handsome within, but mighty homely outside. Maybe you like that kind, though. Are you in the Thought?"

"Don't know," said Strong. "What is it?"

"I can't tell you. Only, that's what I hear them ask. Most of the people that come here are interested in Cousin Mary's high jinks. Madame Berenson, I mean. She's Cousin Mary to me. Used to beau her a little when we was young. She's got a lot of big bugs here from all over the world. They talk about everything you ever heard of. Then a lot of little bugs come to hear 'em, and they say they're seekin' truth. Seems to me, most of 'em are women that got ethical—is that the word?—after they gave up trying to get a man. They get religion here right off the bat. Cousin Mary has a lot of Swamis and Asiatic dominies that invent a new kind of worship every day. In about two more summers there 'll be a separate one for every old maid on the grounds."

"There's one advantage," hazarded Strong, by way of utilizing a rare opportunity. "I won't have to hustle at the table."

French broke in with a staccato laugh.

"I'll give you a pointer. You'll have to hustle to keep up with the mental healers. Ida, that's my wife, says she notices the most spiritual ones eat most."

Strong could not immediately verify his landlady's diagnosis. But he noted no languor on the part of anybody at supper. There was the ordinary hum of conversation attuned to eating, and the ordinary accompaniment of service, uncovering of dishes, little scrapings of knife and fork. Talk of vibrations, and

the coloration of waves visible to the psychic, exposed Strong to no temptation. But prominence came unsought. From modest listening he was thrust into a leading rôle. It was all caused by chicken. As he raised the first bit on his fork a woman sitting opposite deserted the subliminal self to eye him with horror.

"Young man," she inquired funereally, "would you make your stomach a sepulcher?"

"Why, — er — really —" he floundered in astonishment.

"Would you eat your brother's flesh?"

"Certainly not."

"Then let the chicken alone. We are God, and so is all creation. The chicken is your brother as much as I am."

"Oh, are you my brother?" he asked with an air of polite interest.

The lady was stout, with an obvious mustache and a martial air. One would have guessed she was unused to trifling. There was no need to guess that she regarded Strong as a scoffer.

"You are not in the Thought," she said with crushing finality.

Conversation again soared, and Strong returned to his chicken. Its flavor seemed impaired, but conscience forbade desertion under fire. From time to time, he quietly studied other diners. Most of them were elderly, some of them looked ill, and an expression of anxious interrogation — possibly due to much

questioning of the Infinite — was the rule. Steady grilling of the soul seemed physically unprofitable.

Provocative personality was confined to a girl who ate in silence, a perpetual smile lurking in the corners of her mouth. Of generous size, it gave final emphasis to quizzical appeal. Storm slumbered in eyes of greenish gray. There was fire, too, in hair of coppery hue, and a hint of temperament in plentiful freckles. Her tip-tilted nose was an interrogative feature. She was rather stout, and her voice a little strident. Strong also noted that she laughed readily exhibiting a Middle-Western accent. He was presented, that evening, by French, who circulated among his guests with unabashed interest in all that transpired.

Kitty Engel was her name. That she was a violinist employed to play at meetings of the Bellhaven Conference came out in the first hour of their acquaintance. And Strong had illuminative glimpses of her home in an Illinois village, where her father was a doctor, her mother president of the Woman's Relief Corps, and her sister a teacher in the public schools. She had talent; not a dazzling gift, but a quality of soul that made beautiful simple things. New York had failed to stamp her. In manner, as at heart, she remained a small-town girl. Probably that was one reason why she appealed to Strong, and he to her. Another was that they were young where years and trouble, none the less real for being studiously denied, colored society.

CHAPTER VI

SOME teachers are born, and many are made. Strong belonged to the latter class. The Bellhaven School designated as No. 2 interested, but never absorbed him. He labored earnestly and without enthusiasm. Conscientious enough to do whatsoever the hand found to do, he was not enthusiastic enough to do it with all his might. It is unconsciousness of limitations that permits the laborer to surpass self.

No. 2 was typical in attendance as it was in architecture. There was the building, one-storied and white, with the woodshed behind and the flagpole in front. Inside, the air-tight stove, the teacher's desk in the alcove, the revolving globe for geography, and the flanking blackboards, often a target for spitballs manufactured by restless boys.

Pupils ranged from six to sixteen, and their intellectual requirements were strung through the "Three R's" to algebra; even to the Latin and geometry craved by boys hopeful of college. For girls, who excelled in most studies, there was no future more ambitious than marriage with one of Bellhaven's representative sons. How his charges prospered in after years, — if, indeed, they prospered at all, — Strong never knew. He only heard that a boy who recited Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" with thrilling earnestness had been in jail

for stealing a cow. He could not charge himself with that lapse, though he dispensed with Bible reading until the superintendent, being charged with employment of an infidel, and that just before election, restored the Scriptures to their former place. What Strong felt for religion then was substantially his feeling in later years. After a flash of fervor in early youth the fire was never kindled again. He thought of religion wistfully, as he came to think of love. They were beautifying influences denied him.

Two years of teaching were substantially two years with nothing else to do.

If his school did not strongly appeal to him neither did Madame Berenson's Conference interest Strong much. It had noble aspects, but he was occupied with its humors. Fluttering women avid of sensation, and flabby men with souls of wrens, obscured the texture of beliefs they could not comprehend.

Lectures bored him. Kitty Engel never did. He never permitted her to. When uninterested in his surroundings he had a habit of seeming to brood. It indicated nothing more than mental languor, but women, mistaking it for rapt contemplation, were apt to sense in it a delicate tribute to themselves. So his reticence became delicacy, and his relative indifference, modesty. He disarmed by seeming not to attack.

The summer at Bellhaven went pleasantly. Given a free field, an attractive woman can interest any man. What Kitty's intention might be Strong did

not ponder. He was not vain enough to interpose a guard. As to women in general, he felt vague security in youth not evident in his appearance, and in poverty love rarely regards. Besides, Kitty's fondness for him was so undisguised, he dismissed with a feeling of shame the thought that it might be love. Temperament committed him to an æsthetic ideal, but conscience never collaborated to enforce it.

Strong tutored a tow-headed boy, and Kitty played the violin; and abundant leisure they wasted pleasantly together. They canoed on the river by day, and strolled along its bank when summer night allured to revelation of self. Their favorite resort was a boat-house at the foot of a high bluff. There they sat, oblivious of dew and only conscious of river noises, voices of boaters or the creaking sail of some coaster slipping down to the sea, — too remote to break their harmony.

There was no love-making of obvious and orthodox sort. Pressure of the hand, a protective caress accepted in tacit acknowledgment of intimacy, — that was all. They talked of art, of music, of God, and of Bellhaven. Long frozen, Strong thawed freely at feeling himself understood. Afterward he could never comprehend why Kitty, whose customary conversational flow a friend facetiously likened to a telephone exchange, so played the rôle of gentle and stimulative listener to a callow youth.

He never kissed her until the night before her

departure from Bellhaven, which was about to relax into retrospective dissection of the latest batch of "summer folks" and anticipatory criticism of the next. They had returned to the "Retreat" after an evening filled with talk of the future in which Kitty exerted moulding influence. Without feeling he was pumped Strong talked freely of his family, his prospects, as he conceived them, and his hopes. They agreed to correspond, and Kitty admonished him against forgetfulness.

"You promised to visit me," she said, "and you won't forget to write. You will come?"

Her voice was wistful.

"Of course," said Strong. "Everybody goes to New York."

"But I don't mean New York," she explained. "I mean Groveland. That's home. New York is just a place where people stay. I'm never really happy there. I'd like to have you meet my own people. That is, if you think it would n't be stupid for you."

"Have n't we had a pretty good time this summer?"

He was not ardent, but he was cordial.

"Of course," said Kitty; "but afterwards things are apt to be different. And I'd be mortified to think I had bored you."

"No danger of that. Anyway, I'd like to see if a Western town is much different from a New England one. That's stupid and rotten enough."

Touching his favorite antipathy, he was able to finish with heartiness otherwise lacking.

"Oh," said Kitty, "Groveland is quite a nice place. And the girls will run after you till I'm jealous."

"Rubbish," said Strong, feeling uncomfortable. "I'll risk that, if you will."

They had reached the "Retreat," and stood for a moment mutually irresolute. All was still.

"I'll see you at breakfast," he said, pushing open the door.

Up the stairs they groped their way in the dark, and paused again on the landing.

"You to the right, and I to the left" — quoted Strong at random.

"Don't say that," murmured Kitty. Strong felt rather than saw her shiver.

"It's only a song," he said *sotto voce*.

"But I don't like it."

She melted away in the gloom, with a whispered "Good-night." Her chamber door closed softly, and he turned to his own room opposite. He did not strike a light at once, but stood staring into shadowy darkness of the outdoor world. An elm tapped at the window.

"I feel like an ass," he said at length, and reached impatiently for the match-box on his bureau. Lamp-light failed to restore calm. A print of "Sacred and Profane Love" some previous lodger had left on the wall suggested the teasing mystery of self. The

sacred and the profane seemed inextricably confused. He appealed to Omar for relief. With a certain relish he read, —

“And if the Wine you drink, the Lip you press,
Ends in what All begins and ends in,” —

And so on. The quatrains ran pleasantly, with their touch of melancholy that is subtle joy. He did not hear the first gentle rap at his door. He was wrapped in a mood.

There came another tap, more vigorous than the first, and he sprang to the door, book in hand. Kitty stood there in a luminous pathway framed with blackness. She was in a dressing-gown of green-and-white. Afterward Strong remembered a wisteria vine effect of the pattern, and could call to mind the sheen of her coppery hair. A loose ribbon of black confined it slightly at the nape of the neck. She was softened, spiritualized.

In his astonishment Strong did not at first observe what she carried in her hands.

“Oh!” he said. Then added, with perfunctory affability, “Won’t you come in?”

She did not stir, but looked at him doubtfully.

“I hope you’ll pardon the intrusion. Of course I ought not to, but I found a box of goodies from home, and I wanted to share them with you. And this is my only chance. Are you shocked?”

“Of course not,” he assured her hastily, and then he was. There came a slight scraping on the door-

step, a fumbling at the door. Some other roomer had been roaming. Instinctively Strong stepped aside and as instinctively Kitty entered. With discreet haste he closed the door. They heard the front door opened and closed and cautious steps onward to the floor above. With ears alert they heard the quiet closing of a door. Then silence.

Kitty broke the silence with a nervous laugh. "Well," she said, "here it is. The mince pie that mother makes, fruit cake by the same, and marmalade by the same cook. The crackers — please take them from under my arm? — are from the village grocery. Will you venture?"

"If you'll stay to eat with me," said Strong. Omar was exerting a little influence.

"I ought not to. Think of the scandal, if anybody ever hears of it. 'That Engel girl' will be a vanished celebrity."

"Oh, rot!" said Strong cheerfully.

So they ate sociably, using a section of his bureau for a table, and quaffed elation in root beer.

"Well, I must go," sighed Kitty, when the last mouthful of cake had disappeared.

"Don't," said Strong. His hand closed over fingers plucking aimlessly at the bureau drapery.

"But I must." She spoke faintly, and there was no resistance in her attitude. A glance, and a wave engulfed them. She was in his arms. The kiss he gave her was not the kiss he had given Flossy. In the singing of his blood reason reasserted itself for

a detached view. He saw the situation and sought to appraise its significance. But he kissed Kitty tenderly. It were discourteous to be cold. She clung to him for a moment, then drew violently away. No word was spoken. She felt rather than saw her way to his door. It remained open after her as, with no backward glance, she closed her own. Strong gazed irresolutely at its white expanse, then took it as symbolic of the situation.

At breakfast he saw Kitty with others about, and it was the same in farewell. A touch of unusual pallor, heaviness of the eyes, escaped his attention when he said good-bye. She turned to him last of all, with the single word, "Remember."

"I won't forget," he said with a handclasp.

The driver flourished his whip, and, with a rattle of wheels, she was gone.

That day Strong was very lonely. It was worse the next. The summer colony departed like a school of herring, and with them went the gayety of the sunshine, the sheen of the river. Thrown back upon himself, he fell prey to melancholy. Crickets shrilling through the day and night seemed an unceasing chorus of sinister portent.

From the slough of despond he was rescued by a girl named Esther. Her last name does not matter. She was only an episode. She was a slight girl, with light-brown hair, pale eyes of blue, and delicate features. Her unlikeness to other Bellhaven girls was attributed to the fact that her mother, who first

appeared as somebody's maid, was of French extraction. Having given Esther to the community, she disappeared. Parental burdens fell to a spinster aunt and bachelor uncle. Middle-aged and still naïve, they were suspicious of strangers. It seemed to Strong that Esther was overchaperoned. As they struggled at dominoes, or played the thrilling game of authors, Uncle Billy dozed over his newspaper, within easy hearing had he been able to stay awake. And solemnly alert, Aunt Hannah pegged away at her knitting.

For a time Strong did not know they had set their hearts upon Esther's marriage to a young mechanic with whom she had quarreled before he met her. Their unspoken antagonism quickened interest otherwise languid. Esther was an amiable girl, with an appealing air; but they had nothing in common save youth. With a sudden crisis came the sudden end.

It was a mild evening in autumn, and Strong occupied the surviving hammock of the "Retreat's" summer flock. Down the lane from the highroad a woman came, walking rapidly. When she drew near he noted an appearance of nervous haste. And almost that instant he realized it was Esther.

"Why so fast?" he called, rising to meet her.

She turned aside and came straight to where he stood in the shadow. He perceived her excitement, and effort to control her voice. It trembled slightly as she said, "I'm so glad I've found you!"

"What's up?" he asked.

"Albert has come."

"Oh," said Strong, remembering Albert was the lover with whom she had quarreled. "Where is he?"

"At home with Aunt Hannah. I ran away. What shall I do?"

"I suppose you'll have to entertain him. Do you want me to come up?"

She was silent for a moment. When she spoke again the eagerness had gone from her voice. It was a little cold.

"No," she said. "I guess you'd better not come to-night. And I must be going. I've been away ten minutes; Aunt Hannah'll have a fit. Good-night."

"Good-night!" he called, as she hurried up the lane.

Early next day Aunt Hannah called to inform Mrs. French that Esther and Albert had decided to marry "right away." Duly transmitted, this information was received by Strong as a danger signal, and so respected. Since Albert carried his bride away to live, he never saw her again. During the period in which he wondered if he understood that last interview he had qualms fruitful in several poems published by the nearest daily, a very poor newspaper.

Through friendship with Esther his interest in Kitty had not languished. Kitty at a distance was more fascinating than Kitty present. Natural vivacity asserted itself in her letters, and her own ambi-

tions, kept under cover at Bellhaven, flashed in lively comment. Thus stimulated, Strong wrote without restraint habitual in personal contact. There was no direct declaration, but their correspondence assumed a tinge of affectionate interest.

The Christmas holidays were urged as a suitable time for his promised visit to Groveland, and Strong went without premonition of danger. He liked Groveland better than he liked New England towns because he understood it less. Furthermore, it presented only its party side. Kitty's father was a prominent citizen, and Kitty herself seemed the child of the community's collective bosom. It was evident that Groveland expected her to bring it renown. Strong basked in reflected popularity, a little astonished to find it not disagreeable. He attended a Lyceum concert, went to a Charity ball, walked and drove and skated with Kitty. Now and then some smiling matron dropped a hint that made him uncomfortable. But the week of his stay approached its close without definite change of relations. The last evening came, and it was spent at home. Neighbors dropped in, and there was music. Strong thought Kitty had never played better, and she looked her best in a green gown with simple trimming of silver. When the guests had departed, the rest of the family retired, too. Their going was not ostentatious, just a quiet withdrawal.

"Now we can talk," said Kitty, when the door had closed on the last apologetic smile.

There was a davenport before the open fire, and they sat comfortably within its arms. Conversation ran from generalities to personalities. Once more Strong was encouraged to unfold his aspirations, substantially unchanged. Afterwards talk became desultory, with considerable gaps. Silence, save for the snapping of wood in the flames, prevailed when Kitty softly asked: —

“Why don’t you say something?”

“What?”

“You know.”

He rose to replace with his foot a stick that had fallen from the andirons, and stood with his back to the fire.

“I know,” he said, “that you’re the most puzzling girl I ever knew.”

“Puzzling!” Kitty laughed, but it was a laugh without amusement. “You’re the puzzle.”

The tall clock in the hall began announcement of midnight, and she rose decisively. “You’ve a long journey for to-morrow,” she said, “and you ought to be in bed. If you insist on staying up, I’ll trust you to put out the light.”

Upon that she left him, and he sat for a time alone. He had the feeling of one who has accepted courtesies without being able to make expected return.

There was nothing noteworthy in their parting next day, and their correspondence continued on easy terms. In time, however, it languished and died. A last letter came from Kitty, after silence for

several years. Strong kept it, with the withered rose inclosed, until a new loyalty ousted the old. But after that he could remember it: —

DEAR WALDO: —

I have been ill a long time, and truth from the doctor nerves me to be frank with you. Now that I am dying, I want you to know how much I have loved you, and that I loved you almost from the first. Whether you saw it was never quite clear. It was plain, though, you did not care much for me. Yet I thought you did at first. You have a way that seems to convey love where only courtesy is intended. I understood that afterwards, when it was too late.

Please don't think I complain. What I suffered is past. But you will know other women, and it would make me happy to think that my experience had made you careful not to wound.

I must explain the rose I send. You gave it to me that first day at Bellhaven, and I kept it as a whim. Then I could not destroy it because it was the first thing I had from you. I give it back now, to keep as long as I am a memory.

I am very tired, and somehow writing to you revives a pain I thought was dead. So I'll say no more, only "Good-bye!" and remember I love you too much to blame you at all. KITTY.

Kitty's letter came to Strong as a voice from the past. It moved him, but feeling he experienced was less remorse than wonder.

CHAPTER VII

NOT only best-laid plans, but others as well, "gang aft agley." Strong's voice never charmed a court or jury. His oratory swayed no listening audience. He never addressed a county convention. Before he attained his majority he realized his dream of becoming a lawyer had taken the place of an average boy's desire to be a red-shirted fireman, or a policeman twirling his club. And politics became to him a business by means of which men with dirty fingers and violent breath extracted an easy living from a too patient public. The idea was wrong, but not to be wondered at.

In turning from law Strong answered no higher call. It was not even suggested to him that Ruskin had defined architecture as frozen music. Chance decided his course. He met an architect who liked him and discovered he could draw. And Strong returned regard sufficiently to esteem his friend's profession because it was his. Taking it for his own was an easy step.

Now that time and absence had erased irritating impression of his queerness, his father was hopeful of a family asset where he had only anticipated a liability. There was money in moderation for the orthodox course. Through the famous Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Beaux Arts

School he went his way. And the end was a desk in the New York office of the man who had shaped his professional life. That man shall be nameless, for he is not important here.

No girl of Boston or *grisette* of Paris agitated Strong's bosom. His heart lay fallow until he met Eleanor Greeley at an afternoon tea. He went with the loathing of a natural male, to oblige a woman who was kind in Paris without producing an axe to grind. Up to the time Eleanor appeared to him he regarded his presence as proof of weakness. She was sitting on the floor in a corner of the studio, a cushion at her back, and tea and cake in her hands. He nearly walked over her.

"Don't go," she said cordially, as he bowed in deprecatory preparation for retreat. "Of course, you're not properly introduced. But any unpaid man at an afternoon tea is a philanthropist. Besides, did n't I see you talking with Mrs. Decrow?"

"Yes," said Strong, hope reviving within him. "She's responsible for me here."

"And for me, too. You really must get a cushion, — very carefully to avoid a posse for you, — and sit down."

"Your will is agreeable law," he answered, and he seated himself beside her.

Swifter than thought is the impression of personality. Before his eyes had completed their inventory, or he had heard her voice, Strong received a suggestion of buoyant vigor. It was in her carriage. Her

forehead was broad and the mouth wide, with mobile lips. Her nose of generous size was nearly Roman. Heavy brows arched eyes of black, with lively play of feeling. She was tall and strong of build. Her hands, too, were large but well moulded, and aquiver with life in little gestures that punctuated her conversation. She spoke rapidly, with a knack of racy expression. Her voice was strong and rather musical, with a certain ardent quality.

Strong learned she was from Montana, a daughter of the ranch who had turned to art. She had studied in Paris, where amiable Mrs. Decrow had befriended her, and had proved her courage by attempting to establish herself as a portrait painter in New York. She was aflame with zeal, but at heart a little regretful of free airs and wide reaches of the range.

"But this is n't fair. It's too one-sided," she said, breaking off an anecdote of the studio. "You're not telling anything about yourself."

"Architect. Aged 24. Experience, commonplace. Ability, mediocre. Ambition, nothing to speak of," he responded with mock gravity.

"I believe you are a liar," she said calmly. "And anyhow, you're not a pleasant companion for an experience meeting."

"Who introduced you two?" asked a voice above them.

"Nobody, Mrs. Decrow," answered the girl promptly. "We just met, and now that I've called him a liar, it occurs to me I don't know who he is."

"Please present me," begged Strong.

He had scrambled to his feet, with a flush not wholly due to that exertion.

"The formality seems superfluous," said Mrs. Decrow. "You've already reached the language of domestic discourse. I simply warn Mr. Strong that Miss Greeley is an irresponsible agitator of hearts, and Miss Greeley that Mr. Strong wears a coat of mail. Now you are both forewarned and interested, I want you to dine with me. Shall we say Tuesday?"

"I say it," Strong answered without reflection. Combative feeling he could not have explained urged him to closer acquaintance with this girl.

"Then I say it, too," Miss Greeley assented with a challenging glance. "It will be pleasant to see whether we are mutually destructive."

A few commonplaces, and she turned away. Strong regarded her back thoughtfully. The hands were dealt, and the cards on the table, but back up. He was impatient to play.

On Tuesday he knew no more. A connoisseur of humanity, Mrs. Decrow viewed with quiet interest the mutual and reluctant interest of opposite types. When she asked Miss Greeley to sing, Strong wondered whether it would be Schubert or Schumann, or some ultra modern, say Debussy or Richard Strauss. She sang an old French song of warning to a peasant maid named Colinette. He remembered how Yvette Guilbert had sung it, a simple song with its undercurrent of ironic suggestion. Of course

Guilbert was incomparable, but Colinette's danger was not lost to view in Miss Greeley's investigation. She had a rather high contralto, a singing voice that passed for more than it was, thanks to the brain's coöperation with vocal chords.

"What do you think of it?" she asked, without waiting for compliments at the close.

"How do you know about Colinette?" He met charge with counter-charge.

"Why not? I loathe women who go about pretending not to know what everybody knows they know."

"Perhaps," he suggested, "you are a suffragette."

"Perhaps," she retorted crisply, "you are an undiscerning young man."

"Dear me!" Mrs. Decrow interjected amiably. "Before you were introduced you exchanged left-handed compliments. And on second meeting you keep it up. This is promising. I must have you both for my camp, next week. Then you will be able to disagree at leisure. It's a little place in the Adirondacks, Mr. Strong. Eleanor has been there, so I need n't explain to her. A man may be relied upon to take pot luck. Will you come?"

Strong fidgeted slightly. "In a way," he said, "I feel that I forced Miss Greeley into dining with me to-night. But I don't want to feel that she is saddled with my society any more."

Miss Greeley laughed. She was evidently amused. "Mr. Strong need not worry," she remarked lightly;

"he has given me no unhappiness thus far, and I trust he will be responsible for none in the future. Notwithstanding his nervousness, I think I'll go. Perhaps he'll make the trip doubly worth while by posing for David in an ecclesiastical sketch I'm trying to do."

"Honored, I'm sure," said Strong stiffly. He seemed a little sulky.

On his way home he pondered her appearance, from raven hair to her neatly shod feet. She had worn a simple gown of black, accentuating strength like that of a Viking woman. He thought of her pleasantly, as he drifted into sleep. She was like the recollected bouquet of a good cigar when he went his way to the railway station on the day appointed for their Adirondack trip. It appeared she was to be his sole traveling companion. Art or accident had sent Mrs. Decrow on ahead. Misgivings at first entertained were soon dispelled. Miss Greeley had sheathed her sword.

From a little mountain station they drove to the Decrow camp. It was late in the afternoon, and here and there the sun vivified tender foliage of early spring, leaving masses softly dusk. The earth breathed gently in the first sweetness of conception. And an occasional chorus of young frogs in marshy places far below came faintly to the ear. They drove leisurely, with a light accompaniment by hoof and harness.

Brisk enough at first, conversation dwindled to

desultory remarks. Then came harmonious silence. Somehow, — possibly it was a lurch of the trap, — Strong's hand fell upon hers, and stayed there. His heart beat more quickly, and he felt an answering glow. No word was spoken as unresisted force drew them together. His open eyes saw hers closed, and a sudden pallor as their lips met. There was something poignant in that kiss. It was like a grave kiss of betrothal. And all life shrank to almost inaudible monotone that framed their mood.

When she slowly withdrew from his embrace he saw her eyes veiled with unshed tears.

"Why did you do it?" she asked softly.

"Because I had to," he answered with equal simplicity.

"So literal," she sighed; "but that's the best answer. From the first I knew it was you. It was like an answer to the question I'd asked since I put up my hair when I saw your face, with its pathetic discontent, that day at Pozzi's studio. But I'm afraid I ought n't to tell you. You'll think of me as a boa-constrictor."

"I think of you," he said, "as the dearest girl in the world."

He kissed her again. In front the groom cracked his whip smartly, presenting an impassive back.

Strong experienced a novel elation. Eleanor magnetized his vertebræ as no other woman had. She had the effect of blotting detail, so that he viewed things in the large.

Mrs. Decrow greeted them with kindly carelessness. If she saw any trace of their joyous discovery, it was not evident in her manner. That they should be much together was her evident intent. They tramped the woods, where Eleanor was as one returned to her own, and spent hours on the lake that lay in the cup of the hills. When night drew its curtain, the moon traversed velvet water in glistening lanes. Drifting in the gentle current, their ears were gradually attuned to the general chorus of Nature rallying her battalions for the waxing year. Strong discovered in Eleanor capacity that enhanced content. He was incapable of sustained *pianissimo* in love.

The night before their departure was sultry for spring. An uneasy hush presaged disturbance before the evening was far advanced. They sensed it, yet lingered on the water. It was exhilarating to await the first rush of wind. The storm broke with sudden assault that pattered at their heels. They reached the boat-house breathless.

They stood together in the darkness while the rain raced across the roof and thunder rolled through the hills. Occasionally a flash of lightning rent the black sky. He held her closely, and felt her heart beat stormily. Flamingly vital, she lay in his arms. He felt himself slipping, relapsing into hazy rapture. Then he was smitten by a warning rod. The spell was broken. She felt it, too, and shivered slightly.

"Oh, how good, how strong you are!" she murmured.

"How?" he asked uncomfortably.

"You know."

He did know, and knowledge was chagrin. He could not explain that a feeling of cheapness rather than conscience had abruptly sobered him. To do so would be an affront. He wore the laurels of virtue reluctantly.

CHAPTER VIII

WHAT is best understood is least explained. Back in town, Strong and Eleanor entered upon affectionate intimacy. Aside from faces he put upon buildings and the countenances she put upon canvas, they had much in common. Her vigorous intelligence was committed to the moderns in art. A natural conservative, Strong instinctively inclined to the classic. They disagreed amicably as they dined in peace. They sought restaurants untainted by the purse-proud and undisturbed by the pseudo-Bohemian. That such places existed in New York Strong had heard, and Eleanor had discovered. He was quite content to accept her guidance without questioning the source of her knowledge. Jealousy of the past was not in his composition.

The days went pleasantly through the spring, and summer began its annual baking. Their world was away, but they did not mind. Rather they enjoyed the feeling of tourists in a land of strangers.

"There's no seclusion like that in a crowd," observed Strong, as he surveyed the gabbling diners dotting a roof garden where cabaret singers flirted for money, and men bought champagne to show they could afford it, and women laughed at jokes lest it be discovered that they did not understand. Eleanor did not answer directly. She came slowly

from the reverie into which she had fallen. As she raised her eyes Strong experienced a feeling of appraisal that was uncomfortable and new. He moved to refill her wineglass. She did not raise it, but continued to regard him gravely.

"I wonder," she said at last, "whether you intend to marry me."

"Of course," he said, his face expressive of amazement.

"You never said so. You never even asked me."

"I took it for granted," he protested. "I thought you understood."

She weighed his explanation, her eyes on the burgundy before her, reflected in crimson. When she spoke again it was with an air of remoteness.

"I fear I have let you take too much for granted. I yielded too easily for you to prize me much. Of course, there should have been barriers. There should always be barriers between a woman and the man she wants to love her. But somehow it seemed safe with you."

"It was," he interjected, "and it is."

"You think so," she resumed; "but how do you know it is? I only know I will not marry a man to make him comfortable, or to be made comfortable by him. There's more than that in the big adventure. I know what I have for you; but what have you for me? I'm going away to let you find out. We've postponed plans for the summer. Mine will

be spent in study at Berger's atelier in Paris. Yours will be devoted to studying yourself, if you think it worth while. I leave you free."

"How?" he asked bitterly. "By turning me outdoors? Of course, if you are tired of me, I won't beg. But you might be honest." Pride and pain sounded in a voice he struggled to keep calm.

"But I am honest, dear," she said, and her voice was warm again. "I am as honest as I can be, but you won't understand. Can't you see?"

"I'll try. Summer ought to be long enough for an observation. Let's go now."

He beckoned his waiter violently and would not wait for his change. Possibly to counteract such extravagance, Eleanor would not ride in a cab. As they clung to straps in the subway, the rattle of the train made speech superfluous. At her door he turned away with a ceremonious, "Good-night."

"Is n't it customary," she inquired, "for friends to show some feeling when about to part for a long time?"

He paused uncertainly, then turned back.

"Foolish boy," she said softly. "Kiss me 'Good-night.'"

He gave her his lips reluctantly.

"Now, go," she commanded gently, "and forget I have hurt you in sleep."

Two days later she sailed. In the interim there was peace, with gayety on Eleanor's part. Gloomily resigned at first, Strong mellowed a little under the

influence of her insistent good cheer. The reason of her sailing was skillfully avoided. Only at the last moment, with "All ashore!" in his ears, was he able to broach the question uppermost in mind.

"Eleanor," he said with desperate bluntness, "did you mean all you said the other night?"

"Of course," she smiled. "You have the summer. And please write. Good-bye."

He did not wave his handkerchief from the pier, as the steamer backed out into the tide. In a world somehow alien he found the way to his rooms, and sat staring gloomily at a cheerful patch of sunlight. After a while he went to his desk, and in desperation began to write. It was not an easy process. He went slowly, with pauses in which he combated feeling that words put on paper were clamorous as signs blazing the course of Broadway at night. Sentiments he hesitated to utter under the rose savored of hyperbole when reduced to ink. But pangs of loneliness overcame caution, and he poured out his heart. When the letter was finished he took it hastily, as if fearing repentance, and posted it in the nearest box.

There is luxury in the irrevocable to the doubting heart. Having written his first love letter of approved stamp, Strong felt a lightening of depression that settled upon him with the first turn of the steamer's screw. But persons streaming past were curiously intent upon trivial things, and work in the office was neither interesting nor important. In

the late afternoon he wrote and posted a less copious and ardent, but confirmatory epistle.

Dinner was a dreary problem. He would have been indignant at the suggestion that he preferred it so. But he declined to dine with a man he genuinely enjoyed, and betook himself to the roof garden where Eleanor had punctured his unwitting conceit. As he entered, the band was playing the "Siegfried Idyl" again, to different individuals but the same careless and energetically hilarious crowd. Regarded with condescension before, he eyed them wistfully now. Excepting himself, every Jack had a Jill, or two.

Still, though life had lost its savor, one must eat and drink. He ordered burgundy not because he wanted it, but because he last had it with Eleanor. It warmed him gradually and the sensation of a hand clutching his heart was forgotten. The band played "The Artist's Life," and he drifted in memory down the glowing tide of the waltz. From the bitter-sweet of former days he passed in higher key to anticipation. He was not domestic by nature, but stimulated imagination discovered no blotches in the picture of a home.

He slept soundly that night, and next day he departed on a postponed vacation. There was no use in staying where he must be miserable because Eleanor was away. Her first letter was forwarded to him at the seashore.

"Three letters in a batch," she wrote, "and such

real ones. But I had to cross the Atlantic to get them. Dear as you are, I can't resist the temptation to smile when I think of coming to Paris to get acquainted with a boy in New York. Now that I'm here, and you have helped to settle my mind, I intend to work hard. I must do something to make you proud of me. I know you will flush and say 'Rubbish!' But I know, too, that you are rather dependent upon confirmation of your judgments. I'd love you the same, whatever anybody else thought. But this is preaching, which any man hates. And why should anybody be proud of the disposition that came ready made? Please forget I squinted. My eyes never stay that way."

If Strong's burden of loneliness was not soon rolled away, at least it was appreciably lightened. Within a month he questioned whether he was worthy of loyalty that flamed in letters equally expressive of abounding interest in life and regret of what could not be shared. But no disturbing thoughts crept into his writing. He assiduously sustained an atmosphere of devotion. If he had sent her abroad, the least he could do was to make her as happy as possible.

Summer wore away, and autumn returned with the tourist legion. Of Eleanor's coming Strong was duly apprized.

"I am sailing to-morrow on the Marion," she wrote from Liverpool. "The agent says she is constant to her schedule. So I'll expect to see you —

won't it be splendid? — about noon Saturday week. The return voyage will be so much happier than the trip from New York, when I was n't quite sure how much you cared. I have just learned that one of my fellow passengers is a Mr. Cartwright, whom I met at Berger's studio. He was quite attentive in Paris in a nice, friendly way. About fifty years old, much traveled, with some experience in the diplomatic corps, and an acquaintance that seems to embrace everybody worth knowing everywhere. That is about all, except that he's used to being wooed. Perhaps that is why he is a little interested in me. I believe I've absolutely forgotten how to flirt since I met you!"

Over this letter Strong fidgeted a little. It arrived on Friday, and the Marion was due the following day. He had an unconfessed feeling that Eleanor was about to appear with a suitor who plainly put him in the shade. She was true blue, of course, but he rebelled at the thought of sacrifice to love for himself. While splitting hairs with pride he neglected to inquire for news of the Marion. Had he not read, a dozen times or more, "About noon, Saturday"? He reached the pier by noon, carrying carefully a bunch of white violets, Eleanor's favorite flower. He had found them hard to get. The Marion was there, but no signs of excitement, no rapturous reunions. Where were the passengers, and the passengers' friends?

A wandering steward listened politely. Yes, he

himself had served Miss Greeley. But she was gone. All the passengers were gone. What time did they dock? About nine o'clock. It was a record trip, he said with pride. Still carrying the violets, that drooped now sympathetically, Strong took a cab for the house Eleanor called "home." So far as his feelings were concerned, he might have taken a street car instead. His heart did not leap, figuratively or otherwise. He had a blue feeling the deeper because nobody seemed responsible for it. When he had disputed the chauffeur's charge he felt a little relieved; but there was nothing to assist recovery indoors.

Dust was on the doorknob and palpable dirt on the door itself. There was no response to his knock. With sudden impulse he threw the violets into a corner and turned away. Resentment was uppermost now. Where had she gone without a word? Well, what was the use of worrying? In a club he seldom visited he played billiards badly until dinner time, and spent the evening trying to laugh at a Broadway "musical comedy success." When he switched on the light, very late that night in his study, he saw a note placed conspicuously in the middle of his desk. He knew the vigorous, slightly angular handwriting well. To have the shock over, he nervously broke the seal.

"Dear Waldo," it ran, "this is not what I planned, but it seems the best I can do. I guess you depended

upon the Marion's regularity, and this time she has surpassed herself. That is surprise number one. Number two is more important. When we docked I received a telegram saying my father is dangerously ill. Evidently they want me, and I feel I must go at once, sorry as I am to miss seeing you after long weeks and months. I have tried to reach you by telephone without any success. So I can neither see you nor hear from you for a while. With time so limited, it is fortunate Mr. Cartwright was aboard. As I write he is arranging about baggage and railroad tickets, and he has been in other ways helpful. No more now, or I will miss my train. Please write as soon as you receive this, or, better, telegraph, so I may know you understand.

"Your disappointed

ELEANOR."

Strong wrote, a little stiffly, for Mr. Cartwright's "kindness" was as a burr to his mind. Eleanor responded promptly, and plainly she was hurt.

"What is the matter?" she asked. "Surely, you are not disturbed about Mr. Cartwright. I would n't mention him if I could think of any other possible excuse for aloofness when I so sadly need sympathy. There is worry enough in the condition of my father, who is by no means out of danger, without your coldness, which cuts to the quick. I put aside pride, and ask you to explain. Don't deny it, please. Let me have the truth."

He was not wholly candid, but he humbled himself sufficiently to win forgiveness. A dependent Eleanor appealed more strongly than Eleanor triumphant with an ornate diplomatist in her train. He was by nature gentle rather than tender. That she insisted upon the latter construction made him feel hypocritical, as it had before.

"You're queer, but a dear," she wrote. "Every now and then I find I did n't wholly understand you. I suppose that's part of your charm. Never mind. Let's forget all unpleasantness. Father is much better now, and I expect to really return to New York soon. I am so eager to see you."

Their life together was resumed in the old way, but the old spirit was lacking. Again they lingered in out-of-the-way restaurants, and let coffee grow cold while they fenced over cubism in painting, or futurism in music, or some other idiom of advanced art. But there was no longer the glow of *cameraderie*, with added touch of deeper affection.

Sometimes argument rasped a little, and unceasing music of the band became a means of escape from self rather than enveloping influence that shut out the world. Strong knew the difficulty to be his own detachment, but never considered explanation of the fact. Surgery was not in his line. Eleanor, acutely conscious of estrangement, was groping in the dark. Woman is least intuitive when she loves most. But she is more gallant than man to brave

and bear the hurts of love. Eleanor took the situation by the horns.

"I think I know what the trouble is," she said, putting the period to an awkward pause.

"Trouble with what?" he inquired, with hidden watchfulness for dreaded approach.

"The trouble with us." She spoke a little aggressively, nerving herself as a rider lifts his mount to the jump. "We're growing socially *blasé*, taking each other too much for granted. Don't you think we are experiencing one of the let-downs of marriage without having known its joys?"

Her eyes were on him, but he had eyes only for his cigar.

"What do you propose?" he asked coolly. "Another European trip?"

Tears came unheeded, but her voice was still steady. "You are not helpful," she said gravely. "What I want is happiness for both, but first for you. And lately I have doubted my ability to make you happy. Perhaps I expect too much. Are you absolutely sure I am the woman you want to marry?"

There was silence for a moment, as she groped for his soul and he instinctively barred the door. When he spoke his voice was vibrant with emotion that was compounded of irritation and uneasiness, but passed for wounded love.

"Of course you are," he said vehemently. "Do you think I am a weathervane?"

"No, but men make mistakes. And I felt you

changed. I'm still wondering a little whether you really know yourself, as I know my own heart. But I must leave it to you. What shall we do?"

Fear of unfulfilled obligation nerved him to sudden resolution.

"Why," he said, "there's only one thing to do — marry."

Crimson rushed to her cheek, and her eyes were like stars. "I wish we were alone," she said softly. "I can't kiss you here. I know it's our salvation, but I could n't suggest it. You made me propose, and that's shame enough. I believe, though, I could do anything for your good." She paused in self-communion, then resumed: "I wonder if you know how much I love you. You'll never be sorry, dear."

"Of course not."

Now he had her hand, and the warm current of her being submerged reflection. For an hour they recovered the happiness of their first pledge.

Plans accelerated by Eleanor went apace.

"What do you say to a Christmas wedding?" she asked a few days after Strong's crucial suggestion.

"It's a pretty idea," he assented. "I suppose you mean —"

"That each will get the nicest present possible."

He kissed her suitably, and she resumed: "And a little house? Not too far out, but away from the crush, so we'll have a chance to breathe."

He preferred an apartment, with homage to a janitor. But he did not say so. Their great venture

he secretly classified as an experiment for which he was responsible, with Eleanor's happiness at stake. Of his ability to sustain a satisfactory pitch of devotion he was somewhat skeptical. The more reason, then, why in material matters her preference should govern.

They took a house with a garden near the fringe of the commuting belt. Its social complexion was imparted by a "select community" of persons who could not afford to live in New York as they wished, and refused to live in the country, from which most of them came. The hub of frivolity was a country club that served the purposes of a sewing circle and a bar. Golf, bridge, and gossip were the staple amusements. It was called Peachton, and might without prejudice to character have exchanged names with Bay View, Scarbright, or any other of some hundreds of towns that took Robert Chambers for their Shakespeare and regarded Mrs. Astor with a degree of reverence never extended to their Heavenly Father.

Eleanor's people vainly protested Christmas was a ridiculous time for a wedding. Strong's family had nothing to say. Separation and lack of common interests had made them more alien than casual acquaintances. He was socially an orphan.

The prospective bridegroom undertakes his bachelor dinner as revelers of Ash Wednesday Eve take a final fling before their pious plunge into Lent. After the heat of wine and evaporation of good-fellowship,

Strong sat alone. His adieu to the past was not yet complete. From the drawer in which it reposed he drew Kitty Engel's last letter, inclosing a withered rose. As he read it again, a sudden sharpening of memory recalled her vividly. He felt her presence, idealized by her fate. And she touched him from the grave as she had never moved him in the flesh. It was not remorse that he felt, but unhappiness over his inability to forget self in love. Why was he burdened with devotion to which he could not respond? Surely, it was not the common lot.

He recalled his jovial companions of a few hours before, — direct fellows who took life as they took their dinner, without doubt of digestion. They would marry, those who had not already, — and be fond of wives to whom they would lie. And they would cherish children of no particular significance, and plod placidly to the end of mediocre lives, if not happy, at least untroubled by peaks beyond their vision. For himself, not even that. He had a romantic mind that somehow could not focus upon any object. In this mood he was about to enter the "holy bond of matrimony." The irony of it all clutched him in bitter laughter. He checked it sharply.

"You fool!" he said to himself vehemently. "This will never do."

He crossed to the fireplace, where the red remnant of a log lay in the ashes, and stood for a moment with Kitty's letter in his hand. He pressed it to his

lips, then carefully placed it upon the log, where it shriveled, bursting into flame. To his burnt offering the rose was not added. He placed it carefully in an envelope and switched off the light.

CHAPTER IX

THEY had a quiet wedding, — so Strong was informed. It seemed clamorous to him. He felt as he imagined a conscious bug might feel under the microscope. Eleanor had wished to be married among her own people. It astonished him to find so many persons in Montana, and all apparently interested in his bride.

"You must be good to Eleanor," was the slightly varied admonition of women who wiped their eyes as they spoke; and men slapped his back with the hearty remark, "You've got a prize, old boy."

Standing in a shower of congratulation demanding conventional response, he grew stiffly grave. Some observant guests noted his "rapt look." It was intensified under the strain of the "send off." Baited joyously, his resentment rose to cold fury. No loving words were spoken in the ride to the station, with hilarious well-wishers at their heels. Hoots of farewell were still ringing in his ears as he morosely shook himself to get clear of rice that lingered in surprising places. The beginning of marriage was even harder than he had anticipated. Against a sentimental bride he would have locked his arms. Eleanor saved the day. His sulky abstraction struck her as humorous. From covert amusement she came to laughter.

"Do you know," she asked, meeting his resentful glance, "that you look and act like a cat that has had its fur stroked the wrong way?"

"I feel like one," he said, vainly reaching for a rice deposit under his collar. "Idiots!"

"Let me help you," she said, suiting action to word. "Of course they are. But we want to enjoy this trip."

The sense of something escaped sent his barometer up rapidly. In a gush of gratitude he possessed himself of her hands, unmindful of gaping fellow travelers. "Do you know," he asked, "you're the best fellow I ever knew?"

She gave him the frank smile that had first cemented his regard.

"What should a man's wife be?" she said.

Most bridegrooms are uncomfortable and not a few are bored. They do not relish white light that beats upon the newly wed. How his way was cushioned by Eleanor's unexacting care Strong did not realize. He was never sure whether she clearly realized how little he had to give. Where the purely emotional is concerned, it is man's way to exaggerate the sacrifice; woman's, to deny that it exists.

From the missions and haciendas of Southern California, they returned to the inevitable materialism of everyday life. As undomestic as undemonstrative, Strong shirked problems of Peachton for a time. Having promptly decided that the community did not interest him, he devoted himself to dodg-

ing its embrace. He joined its club, but never endured it until Eleanor's father came to visit them.

A lengthy visit, almost before such momentous questions as "Oak or mahogany for the dining-room?" were decided, was unquestionably a visitation. But the paternal Greeley was oblivious of precise points of etiquette. It interested Strong to see how in Eleanor were blended the geniality of her father and the delicacy of her mother, a New England primrose.

"I suppose we'll have to let him come," said Eleanor tentatively, when her father's letter coupling his intention with announcement of his departure arrived.

"It's outrageously soon," he objected, rattling his paper rebelliously.

"But he does n't understand, and I can't make him understand. He'll just think I don't want him. And he's really fond of me."

"Very well," he assented. "Peachton is curious, and we could n't engage a better press agent."

Mr. Greeley came and seemed to overtax the house. He was stout and elderly, and accustomed to wide spaces. And his voice was the voice of one used to calling cow-punchers on the range. He slipped on the hard-wood floors, sighed stormily over imaginary sorrows of his youth, and inquired with unabashed interest into domestic arrangements. Abroad he was even more bothersome, for one was sure he would unbosom himself to all comers. He scraped

acquaintance with maids, with children, with the druggist and the grocer. Strong had a feeling that his affairs, including as much of his past years as his father-in-law could extract, were daily bulletined for Peachton. He allowed his exasperation to show, and Eleanor was troubled, being between two fires. For her father also complained.

"You're growing away from me," he said lugubriously. "That's always the way. Raise a child to comfort you, and somebody turns her against you. There's no place for the old."

He departed depressed, having breached Strong's barrier against sociability. One cannot be haughty with persons who know how much his wife's wedding dress cost, what year she had the measles, and details of her parents' courtship. Still, Strong was disinclined to avail himself of Peachton's pleasures. Eleanor, more adaptable to environment and conscious of the futility of living alone, involved him tactfully. That her talent, more pronounced than his own, was abandoned to disuse in activities of a housewife did not occur to him. He only wondered at her ability to endure the society of women whose minds never ranged beyond doings of a parish and the society page of a Sunday newspaper. She did not explain that it was better to be bored than to try living in an emotional vacuum.

"Do you think it was fair for you to make me say good-night to our guests alone?" she said, when he had absented himself for the latter part of an even-

ing consecrated to entertainment of Peachton's upper ten.

"They were not my guests," he said with the stubbornness of one knowing himself in the wrong. "I never invited them."

"That was not stated in the invitation. Though," she yielded rarely to the lure of sarcasm, "they might have guessed it from your behavior."

"Anyway, I don't deceive them. I don't pretend to enjoy a lot of wholesale and retail blockheads who never read anything but Bradstreet's, and their wives who help make the Social Register a best seller." Unreasoning irritation spurred him to add, "What do you see in them, anyway? Have n't you anything to occupy your time?"

She turned away, and left the room. Apology knocked at his lips, but remained unuttered. When she was gone he took a magazine and began to read. Byzantine architecture seemed a muddle, and his pipe had a puckery taste. For a few minutes that seemed very long he sat in silence; then he called, "Eleanor!" There was no answer, and he called again, stifling impatience: "Eleanor! Where are you? Don't be cross."

With sudden resolution he hurried to the music room. She was not there. He looked in her chamber. That was empty, too. But as he turned away, he thought he heard a muffled sob. He listened intently, and it was repeated. So he found her. In a corner of the clothes-press, and almost hidden by

garments sought to protect her plight, stood Eleanor, the cheerful, the executive, the self-reliant, crying miserably.

"What's the matter?" he asked, as she shrank from his touch.

"Please go away," she entreated, pressing more closely into the corner.

"I can't," he said earnestly, and took her in his arms. He melted at tears where the smiling agony of a martyred saint would have left him speculative. Eleanor did not repel him. She checked her tears with a convulsive effort, as he softly stroked her hair. "Now, tell me," he said gently, "what the matter is."

"Everything has gone to pieces," she answered mournfully.

"You don't mean what happened to-night," he urged, as light dawned upon him.

"That's only the last of it." There was a catch in her voice he had never noted. "I gave up everything to please you. And I've failed. I know you are not happy."

"Nonsense," he said briskly, as tenderness strangled truth. "You're overwrought, and I've been a pig. Forgive me, and I'll stand any Peachton party, even the worst it affords."

"But I invited them mostly for you," she explained, with a slight return of spirit.

"Of course." Now that the clouds were breaking, his spirits took a sudden bound. "You remember,

once I said you were the 'best fellow in the world'; well; you have n't changed."

"But I thought you had," she said, "and I could n't stand it. Tell me again it is n't true."

He kissed her instead, and she was satisfied.

After the little storm their lives ran more harmoniously for a while. But apprehension gnawed at Strong's breast. He was increasingly conscious of folly in taking under false pretenses a life richer than his own. That was what it amounted to. He had promised to love and cherish, and he could do neither. It was not a mere material obligation to clothe and feed, and shelter from the cold. These were but details of duty that made, when true love touched them, a sacrament of the prose of life. He himself had pictured such estate. He had a vision no woman materialized. It was a vision of some one gracious and tender, awaiting his coming in a soft gray mist. He had never clearly seen her face.

There were women a-plenty who cherished an ideal, and lived for a man. Why were men denied this gift? And why was he cursed with a finicky soul? He was under no illusion. He saw himself unworthy of the heart's largess.

It would have been better for both had one been less loving and the other less introspective. There were few invasions now, for Peachton realized itself unappreciated. "Mrs. Strong is charming," matrons would explain, "but he is — just a little uppish, you know." There was the city, of course, but Manhat-

tanese were reluctant to leave their island, and one-sided hospitality was bound to languish. Gradually they fell back upon themselves, their unhappiness, and their discontent.

A Peachton woman who knew a woman whose friend had been painted by Eleanor before her marriage gave her a commission for a portrait. The work was a time-killer, but a fresh cause of pain. Once she would have put some stamp of individuality upon any face. But she had lost her touch. She realized, though her sitter did not, that she was painting a commonplace person in a commonplace way. When the picture was finished she put her colors and brushes away. Only her painting apron was kept where she could touch in passing its dauby front.

They came to dread the evening and to greet the morning with relief. There was no explanation, no reproaches. Strong felt himself solely responsible for the *impasse*. That it was an *impasse* he did not doubt. For he did not love her, could not love her, and she deeply loved him. He would have pretended, but could not. The thought of doing so left him miserably cold. And she would not beg for what should be a free gift.

When winter had died and the mellow weather had come, they walked much together, because the strain of walking was less than the strain of sitting dumb and still. They walked the shady ways that lovers walk, but it was only dread of the curious.

Numbing reticence reduced speech to bald commonplaces. Still, it was less painful than sitting on their veranda and listening to the cheerful hum of groups picked out in the dusk, by the fluctuant glow of cigarette and cigar.

Before their marriage Eleanor had dwelt upon charms of the region, a rolling country with unmanicured stretches, as sufficiently refreshing to make long vacations unnecessary. Now both felt a craving for the society of strangers, of persons who did not know and would not guess they had gone footsore early in their journey on a road that stretched dusty and ribbon-like to the grave.

"Work is slack in the office, and is n't likely to pick up much for a while," he said with elaborate carelessness, when they had sat in absolute silence for leaden minutes, after hearing "The Bedouin Love Song" from a neighboring house. Its passionate declaration was piercingly personal to them.

Not eagerly, rather with the air of one distantly interested, Eleanor asked, "Would you like to go away?"

"I think it would do us both good. What do you say to Narragansett Pier?" There was a hint of eagerness in his voice.

"When do you want to go?" she inquired, passing preliminaries.

"As soon as you're ready." Then he added explosively, "Peachton is getting on my nerves."

She smiled mirthlessly. "I guess it got on my

nerves first. My clothes are ready, with a little work. This is Thursday. Would you like to go next week?"

"Of course." The chair in which he had been balanced came down with a bang. "I guess I'd better write at once about rooms," he said as he went, not too hastily, indoors. As he returned from posting his letter a little later, he caught himself puckering his lips to whistle. "What a fool I am!" he muttered disgustedly.

Eleanor, too, was less heavy of heart. There was no happiness, but something like peace. It was as if a warm wind had swept mist away. When the key turned in the lock it was not the house of dreams that they left behind. Rather it was a haunted place, where the ghost of love pleaded incessantly to be let in.

The Pier was lively, and cordial to the entertaining. Almost as a stranger Strong noted Eleanor's social gift. With the aid of Peachton he had taken from her buoyancy and the indescribable something Barrie styles "bloom." In the society of others this process of a year was undone in days. She seemed again to look laughingly upon the world, and to delight in sharing her enjoyment. Men who regarded him a little timorously flocked about her, and women paid her the rare compliment of admiring one of their own sex.

"Am I too gay?" she said, a little challengingly, after her third dance of an evening with a naval

lieutenant so deeply impressed that he forgot the bar.

"No," he said deliberately, "I give you unlimited liberty. But I am a little sorry for other women." The wonder of his coldness to her glowing charm smote him as he saw her before him. Then he saw a college lad standing anxiously at her elbow. "I wish I were a dancing man," he added, and, bowing, turned away.

He did not see her again until the time when creaky middle-age collects its youthful daughters and sighingly leaves its sons to temptations of man's estate. She was sitting in an arbor with a man, and as he approached Strong noted, sensitive as he was to any aspect of his eternal problem, that they seemed on familiar terms. Eleanor did not start. Pointed by her companion's look, she raised her eyes and saw him standing beside her. Her frank smile swept both him and the other man, who was appraising him with practiced eye.

"I'm glad you've come," she said. "I want you to know Mr. Cartwright. He was so kind to me, you remember, when we lost each other, last year."

Cartwright had risen as she spoke, and as she finished he extended his hand. "It is a pleasure now," he said cordially, "to extend the congratulatory circumstances prevented me from offering before."

They exchanged handclasps, with perfunctory response on the part of Strong, and passed into the

drift of casual conversation. Judging at leisure, Strong found Cartwright an exceptional man. He seemed fifty, or thereabouts, with a slight silvering of dark hair, and a lean, lightly bronzed face dominated by dark gray eyes that, without marked brilliancy, conveyed an impression of poise and power. He was a tall man of rather robust physique and easy manners. His talk was wide-ranging, with an occasional touch of pure Yankee wit. And he had the gift of attention rarer than the gift of speech.

It appeared that he had stopped at the hotel for the night on his way to Bar Harbor, and been presented to Eleanor by a friend. "It was superfluous," he said with a laugh, "but none the less agreeable. Now I'll stay a day or two, if I may. At Bar Harbor I go to my brother's house, and one's relatives may be put off with impunity. If I trespass politely, do you mind?"

His interrogative glance embraced both, and Strong was first to answer. "I'm sure Mrs. Strong would enjoy it," he responded, "and I usually like what she likes."

Eleanor smiled, her eyes on Strong rather than Cartwright. "You know how pleasant it will be," she said simply.

There was a question that trembled on Strong's lips: "Why did you not prefer him to me?" That Cartwright had offered himself he did not doubt, and comparison he made placed himself at a disadvantage with the elder man. And so he wondered.

As a judge, he would have assented to the proposition that love knows neither law nor logic, yet he could not give it personal application. Every heart knoweth its own bitterness, but the transfiguration of love is only explicable to the heart that has bled.

What Strong could not ask Eleanor, since shame restrained him from prying into the nature of a gift he had sadly used, came by frank observation of Cartwright himself. They were smoking together, with the little lapses in conversation that constitute a luxury only lovers of Lady Nicotine experience.

"I suppose you know," said Cartwright suddenly, "that I was once your rival."

"I must confess I did n't," Strong responded with equal readiness. Then honesty compelled him to add, "But I suspected it. And I can't quite see how the choice went as it did."

Cartwright pulled hard at his cigar. "She loved you," he said simply. There was silence for a moment, then he went on: "I'm not ashamed to say that she meant more to me than any woman I had ever known. She does still. Naturally, I told her. She said she loved you. I'm frank to say I tried to erase the impression you had made. I am a little heathen in my feeling that a man is entitled to happiness if he can get it without violent breach of honor. But I failed. She was too stanch. And now I'm not desperately sorry that I did fail. Soon I shall be what mincing ladies call a 'well-preserved man.' Had she married me, a time of painful dis-

parity would have come. You are a better mate. I am honestly glad to see her happy with another man. I would n't have thought it possible."

Strong made no reply. Cartwright had opened his heart. What would he say to reciprocate? He wrestled with an impulse to tell the truth: "She is n't happy. She is desperately unhappy, because I do not love her. I married her knowing it, and was foolish enough to think I could take without giving, and not leave her bankrupt. She would have been better off with you, for at least there would have been no heartbreaking neglect."

The words raced through his brain. Presently Cartwright spoke again.

"I trust you do not think me presumptuous," he said with a touch of pride.

"By no means." The impulse had passed, and Strong's voice was as steady as the hand with which he flicked the ash from his cigar. "I thank you for your frankness. And believe me when I say I, too, would be happy in knowing her happy with you."

There was no more intimate talk. The next day Cartwright departed early. His note of farewell mentioned an urgent telegram.

That Eleanor had been much admired Strong knew when he met her. Mrs. Decrow in substance described her as a fisher of men. But, until he met Cartwright, he was never acutely conscious of her charm to others. She had been unfeminine enough to spare him mention of her conquests. Now

the feeling of guilt in having obtained under false pretenses, inferentially at least, the gift others had sought was strong within him. Something that blended pity and regret softened his manner to the semblance of tenderness. Perhaps it was tenderness. For it was of her wasted life, the precious wine of life spilled upon the sand, that he thought, and that only.

Eleanor for a time seemingly regained relish of life. Upon Strong the problem of their future pressed with leaden fingers both night and day. Deprived of the routine of work in the city, and the no less inevitable routine of domestic misery at home, he lacked power to submerge in distraction of the hour the threat of years. Wherever he went, he saw before him an ominous interrogation point.

The question seemed his alone. Acutely as each realized how pitifully short of a true union they had fallen, they had exchanged no word of acknowledgment. Eleanor was too proud to beg for love as alms. Strong realized that, but she understood less clearly his feeling, complicated by an element of shame. They were too young to be utterly hopeless. Yet fear of inflaming further their aching hearts locked their lips.

Now her burst of apparent gayety, which was partly an effort for his relief, impressed upon him afresh the thought that some way must be found for her release. But he made no headway. For himself, separation would be a boon in escape from constant

realization of a hopeless mistake. He thought, too, of divorce, and stood ready to place power of severance in her hands. He would have been happy in knowing she was the admired wife of Cartwright. It was not in his composition to feel jealousy without love. What did that matter? All plans of self-sacrifice were dashed against the same wall.

Eleanor might assent to a proposal of separation; and she might accept a divorce. But he knew it would not be her choice. As well as if he had heard it from her lips, he knew she would rather cling to the shell of marriage. In being with him, unresponsive as he was, she had sad pleasure, like that of an outcast mother viewing from a distance her lost child.

The most desperate remedy of all he did not overlook. There were moments in which suicide seemed a simple and not too terrible solution. But he feared some blunder in giving it the complexion of accident. To die, seemingly as the only way of escape from her, would be the crowning injury of all. And to explain the act would equally bar her from any benefit. He could see no option. He must go on.

From sad and futile meditation came a period of calm, almost of tranquillity. Softness he had vainly prayed for came to him unsought. There was no mirage of passion, no semblance of devotion; but their mutual life was sweetened by gentleness lacking before. They had lost true friendship in failing to become true lovers. Now they were thankful for

a measure of companionableness. Perhaps Eleanor accepted the change coincident with their return to Peachton as an earnest of something more precious. Strong was under no delusion, but he nourished their new intimacy. Had he been able to counterfeit love, he would have done it joyously. To hear Eleanor sing, to see her again interested in flowers and hopeful of resuming her art, gave him a sensation of justified existence.

Whom God hath joined no man can put asunder. That marriages in general are not canceled in fact, irrespective of law, is due to favorable circumstance more than to human perfectibility. In the most important relation of life the average human stops studying when he has only mastered the alphabet. It was not the fault, but the misfortune, of Strong that he saw unblurred the ugliness of intimacy without love. No drapery of duty concealed the fact. What he assumed could not be permanently maintained. Psychic deceit is not easy to the male. But fate spared him confession of defeat.

In the autumn Eleanor visited Mrs. Decrow in her Adirondack lodge. Strong declined on the ground of business pressure. His real reasons were dread of vivid reminders of days of fatal fondness, and fear of some jar disturbing the delicate balance of their readjustment. Eleanor did not care to go alone, but he urged her strongly.

"You'll enjoy it," he said, "and confer a blessing. Mrs. Decrow wants you, and Dr. Darling needs you."

He'll never be happy till he gets a chance to make that declaration of burning and hopeless love side-tracked by Cartwright's arrival at the Pier. So everybody will be pleased. It will make me easier to know you are being amused while I buckle down to work. I'll come on Saturday, if I can."

That he would not go he knew before Saturday arrived. He enjoyed too much the luxury of being alone. To sit unconcerned and off guard was as restful to his nerves as lolling at ease to the body after severe exertion. The week-end arrived, and he wrote a telegram of regret. It lay on his desk when the telephone checked him in ringing for a messenger. He recognized Mrs. Decrow's voice in response to his "Hello!" and instantly moved to marshal his excuses. But she was not urging him to come. It was something about Eleanor he gathered before crossed wires threw at him the clamorous complaint of a man accusing his broker of disobeying an order to sell. Strong declined to hear details of Umpico Common, and labored to reestablish his connection. When he heard Mrs. Decrow's voice, a little feverish, once more, he sought to direct the conversation.

"What was Eleanor's message?" he inquired. "I lost it when they shut you off."

"It is n't a message from her," came over the wire with an accent of desperation. "It's about her, and I did n't want to telephone; but I was afraid you'd take the train."

"Of course it's all right," he said, a little apprehensive and somewhat bewildered. "What's it about?"

"She's ill."

"Where?" he said, trying to keep calm.

"Here in the city." He could feel her agitation. Separated as they were, he knew she fought to control her voice. "I can't say another word here. Wait till I come to you. My motor is at the door."

"Very well," he assented. "Don't worry about me. I shall be waiting."

What had happened? Manifestly it was something important that Mrs. Decrow had to communicate. Probably some accident had befallen Eleanor. He did not try to guess what it was, but related speculation crept into his mind. As he sat toying with a paper-cutter he wondered whether Fate, having dealt with him ironically, were sitting opposite with another trick up his sleeve.

Mrs. Decrow entered flurriedly, obviously relieved to find him. She gave him both hands, and spiked his natural questions.

"Not now," she said. "Put on your hat. Time is precious, and we can talk in the car."

"The Slater Hospital," was the order given the chauffeur, as he helped her in. Once under way, she talked with more than her customary velocity. It was rheumatic fever, and Eleanor was desperately ill.

"But she never had a touch of rheumatism in her life," he said. "At least, I never heard she did."

"I can't say as to that. She has it now, poor dear, and the doctors are afraid."

It appeared to have come from a slight chill. Eleanor had been on the lake with Dr. Darling, and a sudden shower overtook them. Distressed as he was, Strong's mind leaped back to his own experience, that night in the wind and rain when he had mistaken the call of the feminine for love. He wondered whether Dr. Darling, who had the copious gallantry of a professional squire of dames, found opportunity to declare the devotion he did not feel. How much easier for Eleanor it would have been had he himself possessed the gift of affectionate deceit. While these thoughts eddied in a corner of his mind he listened to Mrs. Decrow's story.

Nobody had taken Eleanor's wetting seriously. She laughed at Dr. Darling's suggestion of a stimulant to ward off danger. But next morning she did not appear, and there was no response to calls. So they entered at last, and found her unconscious. It appeared that Dr. Darling knew something about medicine as well as love. He diagnosed the case as rheumatic fever and advised removal at once as less dangerous than trying to care for her in the mountains. So Mrs. Decrow ordered a special train, and got it promptly, since one of her nephews was an operating executive of the railroad.

"And I took her to the Slater," she continued,

"because Cousin John is chief physician there. Was I too presuming in doing all this without consulting you?"

"You were most kind," he said gratefully. "How can I properly express my appreciation?"

"Don't try now. You see," — she hesitated and put her hand a little timidly on his arm, — "I feel in a measure responsible for you two. You were my prize experiment, and it must n't turn out badly. Please don't resent my saying I know you've not been quite harmonious. It was n't conspicuous, of course, but persons who are a little old, and have nothing to do but watch others, grow sharp-eyed. So I know you've started a little awkwardly. It's so often the case where both are sensitive and high-spirited. But they're the happiest of all when they understand each other. That's why I'm insistent for you. Please forgive me for preaching when I ought to be only full of sympathy."

He could not say, "There is only one way for either of us to be really happy," and state the proposition. He could not say anything. So he pressed her hand, and she liked him more for his inarticulateness.

In the hospital they were taken at once to Eleanor's room. The young doctor who escorted them was quiet and deferential, and not obviously anxious to discuss the case. Possibly he fathomed their connection with Cousin John. Another doctor was in consultation with a nurse as they entered the

room, both studying a chart. Neither gave the visitors more than a casual nod at first, and Strong felt intensified the impression of something soulless that had come of his brief interview with a crisp-speaking clerk in the hospital office. He labored with the inexperienced person's expectation of atmosphere charged with solemnity, hushed and reverent in the house of Pain and Death. That schedules must be kept, nurses disciplined, and elaborate apparatus run on schedule; that system is essential to efficiency, does not occur to the harassed mourner.

Eleanor lay there heedless of his entry. Her face was flushed, and her hair streamed over the pillow. At first glance, in subdued light she conveyed an impression of superabundant vigor. Then he noted her eyes staring into vacancy, and how her fingers aimlessly picked at the counterpane.

The doctor turned from his conference with the nurse, and appraised them swiftly. "Mr. Strong?" he said. "And Mrs. Decrow? Dr. Decrow told me you were on your way. He will see you later." He hesitated, and gave them an inquiring glance. "Perhaps you know nearly as much about the case as I do. If there is anything I can tell you?"

Neither spoke and he went on. "Of course, it's a very serious attack, but we are hopeful. The delirium will have left her to-morrow."

"Meantime —"

"There is nothing you can do." The doctor was ready with the customary assurance. "She will be

under constant observation, with the best of care. Should there be any important development, which is unlikely, we will notify you at once." Both voice and manner were charged with professional suavity.

It was evident that the men of medicine preferred to fight the battle alone. Strong accepted dismissal, yet was loath to go. Separation from Eleanor in health had been relief. Separation from Eleanor ill and unconscious seemed like desertion of duty. He stepped to her side for a last look, and stooped to brush aside a strand of hair straying over her eyelid. As he touched her cheek her right hand sought and clasped his hand. He thrilled with feeling that was neither husbandly nor paternal, nor the exquisite yearning of a lover. It was protective tenderness evoked by a call from the deep. Somewhere in the dark her blindfolded soul knew and claimed him for its comfort. She was not conscious of his presence, but a strained look, as of one groping affrightedly, was succeeded by an expression of peace. She lay quietly at rest.

When he sought to disengage his hand she clutched it tightly. To break her grip he had not the heart. And so he stayed. Divining his mood, the nurse placed a chair at the bedside.

"I seem to be drafted," he said to the doctor. "Do you think I will do any harm if I remain?"

The doctor looked at his patient, and took her pulse. For domestic considerations he had no mind.

"No," he replied judicially. "In fact, you seem to have a tranquillizing influence."

With this tacit permit Strong turned to Mrs. Decrow. "I know you'll excuse me for leaving you to get home alone."

"There's nothing to excuse," she said. "My car is still at the door." She fumbled in her purse and extracted a latch-key pressed upon him as she rose to go. "You must make my house your home for the present. Don't refuse, for I won't listen to you. There's nobody needing you in Peachton, and nobody has a better claim in New York. Besides, I really need a male creature, somebody the butler can respect. Come and go as you please, only let me know how it is with Eleanor. Good-bye!"

She was outside the door before Strong had opportunity to reply. After her went the doctor on his rounds, and the nurse betook herself to a sitting-room within sound of the bell. He was left alone with the body that blindly fought disease.

It was twilight when his vigil began, and soon night nurses came to replace those of the day. With much rustling and whispering, responsibility was shifted and quiet reigned again. It was a calm pregnant with apprehension, with watchfulness that was electrical, with the straining of minds conscious of suffering and reaching for consolation. Sometimes a faint moan came to his ears, and at stated intervals a white-coated young doctor paced silently down the corridor. The slow-beating heart of the city

that never soundly sleeps stirred the night with light pulsations.

When dawn came, turning artificial light pale yellow, he still sat there, and Eleanor's hand still tightly clutched his own. Through the long hours she lay in coma so deep it almost seemed that life itself had fled. A moment only the veil was lifted. He felt her glance, as he sat staring at the floor, and lifted his eyes to meet it. Bewilderment and relief were mirrored in her eyes. She struggled for understanding.

"I'm so glad," she whispered, and slipped into oblivion again.

He slept himself, for nature would not be denied.

"I guess I'm a poor nurse," he said confusedly, when the doctor tapped him on the shoulder.

"We're all mortal," observed the doctor, "and you have about reached your limit."

"But I can watch a while longer," Strong protested.

"You are not allowed to. One patient is enough in a family of two. If you come back before noon, the nurse won't admit you."

Though his manner was jocose, his earnestness was evident. Too weary to resist, Strong permitted himself to be bundled into a taxi. Neither the shaking he got from a chauffeur rejoicing in speed, nor sights and sounds of early morning could unseal his eyes. He only wakened sufficiently to pay his fare at Mrs. Decrow's door, and to follow a servant evi-

dently instructed about his room. The next he knew was midday and the sun streaming across the bed. Slowly at first, and then with convulsive grasp, he recalled events of the last twenty-four hours. There was a telephone within reach and he at once turned to call the hospital.

"Doing as well as can be expected," came the stereotyped reply.

He knew there was nothing to be learned that way, and impatiently began a hasty toilet. Luncheon awaited him, and with it Mrs. Decrow.

"Don't try to tell me any news," she said. "I know all that from Cousin John. Just eat, and remember you are responsible for the health of two."

She rattled on entertainingly, and Strong was grateful for distraction. At the hospital there was little change. Eleanor was conscious at times, with the fever still crescent. They would not let him stay. He might watch again at night, but until that time he was barred. What to do until then was the question. He craved action. His office seemed the only outlet. It was deserted on Sunday, so there was nobody by whom his action might be misconstrued. Where he left it on Saturday he resumed work on plans for a country house. It was a commission from a man preparing for marriage. Since his own cropper, Strong always speculated on the chances of those venturing matrimony, with an impersonal wish for their well-being.

After the light failed, and he put aside his drawings, he sat a long time, smoking and drifting in narcotic dream. Then he realized it was late and sought the nearest hotel for dinner. Not that he was interested in eating, but it was something one had to do.

That night the hospital seemed less strange. He was rid of the feeling of an intruder in purgatory. While not always lucid, Eleanor was always in a measure conscious of his presence. He could feel the pull of her dependence, whether she tossed in fever or had restless sleep. There was little said, for she was too ill to think, and he was afraid to speak. But something unanswered buzzed in the back of her head, and at last she framed the question:—

“Were you here last night?”

He stooped to listen, then answered gravely: “Yes, dear.”

She sighed with content, and pressed his hand feebly.

“You are so good,” she murmured.

He could not answer, and seemingly she did not expect him to reply. Her eyes closed, she drifted in vague consciousness of existence. Whether she slept he could not tell, save when the fever ran higher and she tossed in pain. So the battle went on through the night. That it was a hard fight for life was evident even to Strong’s untrained intelligence. He felt the unexpressed solicitude of doctors and nurses, who seemed in their quiet conferences unconscious

of his presence. The fortnight that followed stood out in after years as the most singular of his life, — it was so full of pain, so crowded, and yet remote, as the clearly observed experience of another man. He slept only in snatches, for he was in the hospital each night and at his desk for the day. To remonstrance he turned a deaf ear. Pride he mistook for consideration made him resolved no one should be saddled with his trouble.

He discharged his duties with painstaking care, and went about the routine of life with unruffled front. And through all his wakeful hours hammered self-accusation. Pity and regret so flooded his heart that he thought he felt love blooming there. Would he have a chance to redeem his blind indifference? We are what we are, not what we want to be. But Strong's delusion was sufficiently lasting for the blessing it could confer.

Day by day he saw Eleanor wasting away, and day by day grew his tenderness, his vigilant care. Finally the fever departed, leaving the wreck of her former self. The end of the pitched battle brought a natural let-down in attacking forces. In Strong it was marked by reappearance of a tinge of natural reserve. Thus, seeing what ravages disease had wrought, she feared loss of newfound happiness.

One day he found her holding a mirror. She did not hear him as he entered quietly and stood watching her, bolstered in bed to catch the favoring light. She confronted herself without consolation. The

glass dropped from her hands, and a tear rolled down her cheek. Another followed. She did not sob, but wept quietly, hopelessly, with wide-open eyes.

"This is a moist greeting," he said lightly, hoping to lighten her somber mood.

She did not answer, but held out her hands. He took her in his arms, and held her for a minute, smoothing her hair.

"What's the matter?" he asked, when she had ceased to tremble.

"I'm so ugly," she said sadly, "and so weak. I used to think that at least you had a healthy wife. I had a superior feeling about ailing women. Now I'm broken down completely. You'll be sorry, I know, but you won't be really fond of me."

"Nonsense." He kissed her, and drew her closer. "You're morbid. You have been through a hard siege, but we'll have you on your feet again soon."

"Do you think so?" she said wistfully. "I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

"I don't know. Perhaps it's fear of losing what I wanted more than anything on earth, or in heaven, either. Last night I dreamed I was carried to heaven against my will, for you were left behind. I struggled to go back, and woke crying. I could n't tell the nurse. She'd think me silly, and I did n't mean to tell you."

"Is that all?" he inquired, regarding her indul-

gently. "Then let me tell you that such a change of residence won't be tolerated. You may leave Peachton, if you please. I could stand that. But wherever you go, just count me in."

For an instant her soul looked forth unafraid. Then she veiled her eyes, and seemed to study the counterpane. As she traced its pattern absently, a ring slipped from her finger.

"Please keep it for me," she said, extending it in the palm of her hand.

"But it's your wedding ring," he expostulated.

"I know, dear, but it's so loose. Last night I lost it. It just rattles around the bone. Keep it until I have a presentable finger again. I can afford to let it go now —"

She paused, as if seeking a word, and he finished the sentence, — "Better than when you had nothing else."

"We won't speak of it again," she said. "It's all past now. You've done so much for me lately. Will you do one thing more?"

"Name it," he challenged promptly.

"Go home and sleep to-night. Not a peaceful night since I've been ill. And you show it, dear. I love the lines for what they mean, but I'll worry now till you are rid of them. Remember, if you fall ill, I'll have a relapse."

"Don't you want me?" he asked, a little hurt.

"Yes, but I don't need you now, and you need rest. Will you take it?"

"To please you, I will, if the doctor says you are all right."

The doctor gave assurance. There was no reason to expect any changes, he said. Mrs. Strong's suggestion was wise. So he went to bed that night in orthodox fashion. It seemed a little queer at first, and his thoughts strayed to the hospital. Once his hand went to the telephone, but he did not call.

It was still dark when he awoke with a start, and sat up in bed. His numbed mind harbored the impression that some one had called him. Then the telephone rang again, a little longer and insistently. He clutched the receiver, instantly alert.

"Yes," he said, laboring to keep his voice steady. "This is Mr. Strong. What is it?"

"This is the Slater Hospital. Mrs. Strong has had a relapse, and the doctor thinks you had better come."

"How serious is it?" he demanded, reaching with his disengaged hand for any article of clothing within reach.

"I can't say. This is the telephone operator."

There was no animation, no sympathy, no responsive intelligence. It was just the voice of a machine in mechanical discharge of duty. Strong clenched his fingers in exasperation.

"Very well," he said; "I'll come as quickly as possible."

As he dressed with nervous speed, conjectures of disaster jostled one another in his mind. He mechan-

ically reached for his brushes, then turned away with an exclamation. With the stealth of a thief he descended the stairs. There was no need of robbing Mrs. Decrow, or any servant, of sleep. Some night-hawk cabman would be prowling about. He began walking in the direction of the hospital. The street was remarkably quiet. One block, two blocks, and he had encountered only an inebriated wanderer. He was wasting precious time. Perhaps he was losing his last chance to see Eleanor. He had refused to harbor the thought that Death itself might be behind his summons. Now it took him by storm. Instinctively he quickened his stride, then broke into a run. Three blocks, and no cab in sight. But he heard the humming of a motor that rounded the corner ahead and quickened speed with a bark, its searchlights streaking the pavement with white.

Whose motor, and what kind of car it might be, Strong did not reflect. He acted primitively; in a minute, or half a minute, the car would be gone. Heedless of consequences, he plunged into the street, waving his arms and uttering inarticulate cries. The brakes went on with a click, and the car slid with locked wheels until its blinding light shone full into his distorted face.

"What in hell is the matter with you!" snapped the man who sat at the wheel.

Panting with exhaustion, Strong threw at him the all-absorbing fact: — "I've got to go to the hospital."

"You'll get there all right, and go in an ambulance," said the motorist roughly. "What's the matter with you?"

"My wife is dying." Strong was no longer hysterical, but the burden upon him made him careless of everything but fact.

"The devil!" said the motorist in a softened voice. "Get in."

Silently Strong obeyed, and upon the pressure of a button the engine again panted to be free. "Where to?" inquired the drafted escort.

"The Slater."

No word was spoken while they raced through deserted thoroughfares and rushed up the hill to the hospital doors.

"I can't thank you enough," said Strong, as he stepped to the ground.

"Don't try. Do as much for any fellow in a box. Luck to you."

He was off again, still unknown. For a moment Strong stood watching his dwindling tail-light; its dulling red suggested what paling lights of the city confirmed, that it was near dawn. As he passed the office door, a sleepy-eyed girl put down a book she was dozing over and accosted him: —

"Is this Mr. Strong?"

"Yes," he said, only slackening his gait.

"The doctor wishes to speak with you."

"Where?" he asked, coming to a stop.

"In the reception room, ahead on the right."

The doctor was easily discovered. He had handled Eleanor's case from the start, and Strong had found him uncommunicative in detail. He was skillful and honest, no doubt, but Strong had sometimes felt that even his beard was worn as a check on indiscreet utterance. Now he felt an almost savage impulse to wrest from him the truth.

"You wish to see me," he said bluntly.

The doctor cleared his throat and fingered his watch-chain. "Yes," he explained with slight hesitation, then made the plunge. "I thought it best to prepare you for seeing Mrs. Strong."

So it was true, the worst he had feared. He summoned strength to meet the shock. In the painful silence a clock's ticking and the jingling of keys in the doctor's pocket seemed vociferous disturbances. When Strong spoke again his voice was strained and flat with his effort to be matter-of-fact.

"Prepared for what?"

"For the worst," said the doctor, falling into laconic vein.

"You sent me away. You said there was nothing new." His manner was that of a judge to a convicted man.

"That was true." Put on the defensive, a shade of resentment sounded in the doctor's voice.

"Then why was n't I told?"

It came out then, the effect of the fever and the reason why he had been kept in the dark. It was her heart, the doctor said, a double leakage. Such a

result was not uncommon, and in Mrs. Strong's case it was particularly pronounced. Still, up to the present they had hoped to save her. They had not reported this trouble because she insisted that it be kept from him. Perhaps it was wrong to humor her, but she was a very persuasive person. He would have said more, but Strong cut him short.

"There's no use in rowing over the wrong and right of what you did," he said quietly. "She needs me, I'll go in now."

"Perhaps I'd better go with you," said the doctor, rising as he spoke.

"I'd rather you would n't. Is n't the nurse able to do what can be done?"

"Yes. There is n't much."

"Good-night," said Strong, and turned away.

Sharpened by anticipation, he grasped details of Eleanor's sadly altered appearance in a long glance. There was the mysterious something that heralds death, and holds the robust living by impalpable barrier. She lay slightly bolstered, her black hair flowing over the snowy pillow from her hardly less pallid face. Her eyes were closed, but they opened as she sensed rather than heard his approach, and a measure of their natural luster returned.

"I'm so glad you've come," she whispered. "Take me in your arms."

With infinite gentleness he enfolded her, and she seemed vitalized for a moment. His tears fell upon her face.

"It can't be true, Eleanor," he said brokenly. "It can't be true."

"It is true, dear." Her voice was faint but steady. "Don't cry. I did n't mean to leave you so suddenly. I thought if it came to this, there would be more time."

The nurse moved to apply some restorative to her nostrils. She waved it away.

"Not yet," she said. "I don't need it now." She was silent for a moment, then went on with a slight access of energy. "It's strange to be going just as the day comes. And I'm young. I've hardly lived at all. But I'm not afraid, and I'm not unhappy, now that I know you love me. I thought you never would."

"Precious," he said, and kissed her lips.

A smile of love hovered about her eyes, still vital with the spirit that could not animate her body.

"I don't want you to mourn — too much. If you find some one you care for, by and by, don't think of me as a ghost."

"Please don't," he entreated chokingly.

"But you're human, dear. And, anyway, I've been the first. I'd like to rest in the place where I have lived with you. Peachton was hateful, but now it seems like home. Will you keep me there, and not let them make you send me away?"

His tears were falling unheeded now.

"Was n't it queer I had that dream of heaven. It comes back. Hold me closer. I can't feel you, dear."

She trembled slightly, and her eyes closed. The nurse stepped to the bedside. "You'd better give her to me," she said quietly.

"What?" he said uncomprehendingly.

"She's gone," explained the nurse gently.

He neither moved nor answered, but sat with the body in his arms. The soul's sudden flight was for the moment beyond his comprehension. All that remained he clasped closer in a sudden access of protective impulse. But there was no movement of the shuttered eyes, no fresh curving of lips that seemed arrested in a question.

The voice of the nurse, sympathetic, but business-like, recalled him to reality.

"If you will make your arrangements, I will attend to matters here," she suggested.

"Thank you," he said, and relinquished his burden.

As he left the hospital a group of young doctors were frolicking with a football in the yard. He thought of them, not with envy, but with fleeting wonder at tragic contrast. Then the utter misery of absolute loneliness swept over him. Streets he walked blindly teemed with men and women pouring out to their day's work. But they brought no sense of kinship. He had the feeling of one left in a world, with all its monuments, alone.

Mrs. Decrow awaited him. Evidently she had heard the news.

"I don't want to bother, but I do want to help,"

she said in her warm-hearted way. "Tell me what I can do."

"Nothing, thank you. I think I can attend to everything, and it is better for me to be busy. Do you understand?"

"Of course." She hesitated, then ventured a suggestion. "Perhaps you would like to have the funeral here. It would be Eleanor's preference, I think."

"I'm sure it would. And I'm very grateful for your kindness."

He turned away abruptly, feeling he could say no more. The sound of his voice, strained and strangely monotonous, somehow overthrew self-control. Things seemed topsy-turvy, and a yellowish mist, shot through with black, annoyed his eyes. He had a sensation of oscillation, as if his head wagged after the fashion of grinning automatons in a shop window.

More through sense of direction than power of conscious observation, he made his way from the house. Outside it was better. The keen air steadied his brain, but his legs were laggards. Perhaps it was food he needed. It occurred to him that he had eaten nothing since the preceding day. There was a dairy lunch in sight, and he entered. Nobody in the café regarded him curiously, which was a comfort. For he had a feeling that he was singled out and set apart, a marked man. To each human life's great experiences are as original as if no other had loved and suffered.

We are like trees that bow to the gale, and straighten when the shock is past. And those that yield unreservedly are quickest to recover. In sad business of the day Strong felt a faint satisfaction of service. Had he analyzed it, he would have recognized the *diminuendo* of a passionate pretense.

There were hospital authorities, as gravely impassive as linen merchants, to see, and the undertaker, professionally sad, with the damper pedal always on his voice. Messages to relatives he wrote reluctantly, each curtly summoning a mourner for what seemed to him a tragedy exclusively his own. He dreaded perfunctory sympathy and privileged curiosity. Most of all, he dreaded Eleanor's father, anticipating his inferential reproaches and ostentatious grief.

That night he watched with Eleanor alone. The fire of purification still burned in his breast. With her he was still shut off from the world. Knowledge that she had died believing herself loved imparted to his grief a subtle tincture of jubilation. His offering had been laid upon the sacrificial fire. And it had been effective in this, — she would never be unhappy any more. Of supernatural intelligence after death he had no thought. God was a convention deferred to in crises, but otherwise not felt. He did not think of this as he watched, but it underlay both thought and feeling.

Eleanor was robed in her wedding dress and the restored wedding ring glowed dully upon her finger.

It was as if she slumbered briefly. The seal of eternal mystery struck no chill to his heart. They rested together in communion beyond possibility of disruption and deceit. Dim light within was slightly strengthened by a street lamp. There were changing shadows, and sometimes he fancied that she smiled.

Friends said he "bore up well" in days that followed. He could not share his secret with any one, much as he wished to do so. It was humiliating to be credited with nobility he knew he lacked. The journey to Peachton restored his poise, for Eleanor's relatives acted as an irritant. It was evident that they regarded burial in the East as the climax of a campaign of estrangement for which Strong was solely responsible. He endured their insinuations for her sake. It was another service he could render.

For a young place, and a frivolous place, Peachton was strikingly mindful of the hereafter. Its planners had reserved for a cemetery a plateau of pleasant prospect. Through the valley wandered a river and the hills beyond were wooded in picturesque profusion. In the cemetery itself trees were not lacking. They were bare now, but in spring they would be vocal with mating birds, and they would murmur sociably in drowsy hours. If one must mingle with the mould, it is well to be resolved into gracious scenes. And Eleanor was one that had loved nature well.

Near sunset of a perfect day they brought her to

the grave. It was still and clear, with a glow of russet upon the hillsides. Earth's mood soothed Strong in the midst of poorly suppressed lamentation. Seeking detachment, he recalled Straus's "Death and Transfiguration," which Eleanor had loved. And again she sat beside him, held captive by a lofty voice. It was not "ashes to ashes, dust to dust," that he heard, but strings indescribably thrilling in the departure of the soul.

When it was over he came home again. It was his home now in a new and special sense. He anticipated it, and coveted seclusion. That his behavior was regarded as odd did not weigh heavily upon him. His own relatives were accustomed to think of him as a singular person, and Eleanor's people had no wish to be with him unnecessarily. When they boarded a train he heaved a sigh of relief, feeling they were disposed of forever.

The house was as he had left it the day he first heard of Eleanor's illness. It abounded in reminders of her, and he luxuriated in them, going from room to room. She had left things as if shortly to return. There was her sewing-basket, with the needle in a bit of embroidery, and a piece open on the piano. He noted it was the song of Colinette, and memory went back to the time he fancied she sang it to mystify him. He touched her slippers caressingly, and her dressing-gown hanging in its accustomed place. Of a sudden he felt her presence, not wasted by disease but eloquent with beautiful womanhood,

and marveled that he had been so unresponsive. He dared to dream what life might have been. Thus he sat until midnight had ushered in another day.

His appearance in the office next day was evidently unexpected. The suggestion that he must need rest he met with the statement that occupation would be best relief. So he went on with his work, to and from Peachton as though nothing altering life had occurred. He nursed his impressions with care lest they fade. That they would fade was in the nature of the inevitable. Peace was succeeded by unrest, unrest by melancholy. All the days he had helplessly wrought unhappiness circled him in sad procession.

One day on impulse he sought rooms occupied in bachelor days. They chanced to be vacant, and he promptly engaged them. Through that night he worked steadily at the task of sifting his belongings. Only his personal effects and a few keepsakes were set aside for transportation. The next morning he turned his key in the door of the Peachton house for the last time. His mother, still aglow with maternal idolatry nothing can change, attended to the chilly task of breaking up housekeeping.

CHAPTER X

THE fruit of forgetfulness is peace. "One life, one love," is preached to humans, and commonly practiced by geese. But feathered mates are slow to pair, as well as to forget. Caution is not planted in the heart of man.

The year following Eleanor's death was valuable to Strong, both personally and professionally. He plunged into work with eager application that served as a substitute for brilliant talent. And as he gained in prestige, he grew in grace. He had been quietly intolerant. Now he was mindful of life's undertow, the hidden current that drags at the swimmer's knees. He no longer saw character in black and white, but as a composition to which the casual beholder is by no means certain to find the key.

If his firm had not received a commission necessitating study of the cathedrals of France, and the partner best fitted for the task fallen ill with no time to await his recovery, Strong would not have met Mrs. Follinsbee. But he went and worked diligently in several cathedral towns, and what he knew of them was mostly architectural. Paris he had taken as after dinner one takes a *liqueur*. In student days neither *joie de vivre* nor the side celebrated by Verlaine had appealed to him much; and it was no

different after some years' absence. While he recognized their surface charm, he felt a sort of antipathy to a people whose children were so cheerfully conversant with the obscene. So he was not sorry to see Calais, and he was pleased to see Dover. With Liverpool he was more content. His thoughts were on cathedrals rather than the feminine when he boarded the *Lewantic*.

It was mid-fall, with the passenger list still heavy. Knowing no one, he congratulated himself upon securing a steamer chair protected by a corner. That reduced the danger of boredom. The smoking-room had no terrors. Man is a gregarious animal, but with whiskey and soda and an illustrated weekly at hand he will not mercilessly pursue his prey.

He went to his first dinner on the *Lewantic* as one enters a wilderness of unknown perils. For he had neither intrigued for exalted place at the captain's table, nor taken pains to attach himself to persons of interest aboard. He trusted to luck, and it seemed that sanguine spirit had profited him.

The Carvers he dismissed upon brief inspection. Carver was a small, sallow man with a gay nose and a hesitating manner. He was said to be a lawyer in some Western city, and Strong jumped to the conclusion that much of his practice was in the court of domestic relations. A lady of imposing port and unaccountable attire, Mrs. Carver wore a diamond necklace and the Baptist faith with equal assurance at breakfast.

The Follinsbees were better, much better. At least, Mrs. Follinsbee was. Some women are as conspicuously thoroughbred as a fine horse. Others are endowed with beauty so undeniable that to flout it is as useless as mocking the sun. But the heaviest execution is not by those that compel homage, but by those that tap the spring of protective instinct. Mrs. Follinsbee was petite, and probably in the late twenties. She had brown eyes and golden-brown hair. A Münsterberg, or another woman, might have detected a hint of hardness in the corners of her mouth; but there was no warning for an ordinary man in the deliciously upcurved lips. There was something in her habitual expression at once piquant and wistful. It was like a telepathic confidence.

Strong's first impression of Follinsbee was not harsh. It was only that he might be ignored. He was short and smooth-shaven, ruddy and a little bald. He looked amiable and unintelligent. That night at dinner he spoke only once to Strong with any evidence of real interest. That was after first hearing his name. "Marsh, Strong & Co.?" he said, mentioning a prominent New York banking firm's name.

"No," replied Strong, "just an architect."

"That so," said Follinsbee noncommittally, and returned to his roast beef. It appeared that he was a stock broker, but bridge and golf were his serious interests. Of his manner toward his wife one might almost have said that he had no manners at all. He

was not rude, but he could not have seemed less mindful of the presence of a family pet.

Mrs. Follinsbee was cordial and charmingly deferential. It was quite obvious that she was not brilliant, and equally obvious that she was intelligent. Of the play of the year in Paris, or the book of the month in London, she could furnish a respectable opinion. But she seemed anxious to find out what Strong thought. By process of elimination she reached the thing he had at heart.

As they rose from dinner Follinsbee rediscovered Mrs. Follinsbee. That was apparently due to a question of time. A casual glance at a clock led to hasty examination of his watch.

"Promised to see a feller about a rubber this evenin'," he said, reducing speech to suggestive outline. "Meet you later on deck. Perhaps Mr. Strong —"

"Delighted," said Strong promptly, gathering the drift of thought. "That is, if Mrs. Follinsbee will accept me as a substitute."

"That is impossible," she said. She arrested his look of astonishment with a sudden smile. "But, of course, you may come."

"I've neglected to see who has the chair next mine," she remarked as they reached the deck.

"That's queer. I'm equally ignorant. Pray for my preservation from some giggling flapper, or a Dreadnought in petticoats like Mrs. Carver."

"If you'll pray for my protection against fatherly

graybeards, with a daughter like me, and sophomores with cynicism sticking to them like fresh paint."

"Suppose we organize the Lewantic Mutual Protective Association, Limited."

"How limited?"

He deliberated as they paced the deck with easy strides. She walked well, with a springy step.

"How would a membership of two do?" he asked at length.

"So quickly?" she said with an accent of raillery. "You are a very amusing person for a serious person."

"Pardon me," he said stiffly. "I was presumptuous."

"And sensitive, too," she said with a little laugh. "I would n't have thought you spry-tempered. It's quite interesting."

He pulled up with an ironical bow: "'IT' is deeply grateful."

He saw the mischief in her eyes lost in a look of friendly concern.

"Please don't be offended. I think a membership of two would be large enough."

He regarded her doubtfully, and she extended her hand. "It's a bargain, then," he said, and held out his own. As they resumed their promenade, the hand she offered remained in his possession. It seemed a mark of comradeship that at once established friendly intimacy. Neither spoke while they

paced half the length of the deck. Then Mrs. Follinsbee broke the silence, saying meditatively:

"I've a ridiculous feeling of having known you always. Yet you were a stranger to me less than two hours ago. How do you account for it?"

"Possibly you were bored," he suggested.

"Prosaic creature!" With mock disgust she tried to withdraw her hand. "Is that the best you can do?"

"Is that the best YOU can do?" he returned calmly.

"I wonder," she said, with a critical look, "whether it's natural or acquired."

"Naturalness is acquired," he said, as one considering a matter thoughtfully.

"Who taught you?"

"What?"

She shrugged her shoulders. The period that followed was like a period at chess. Presently she made her move.

"Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"Not before you make it. It might save time."

"Are you married?"

"No."

"But you have been." Her tone was insistent.

"Yes," he said soberly.

Of a sudden his thoughts were far away. It was not the deck of the *Lewantic* that he saw, with snatches of faint music riveting the spell of a slumbering sea. The same moon looked down upon the

hillside of the lonely dead. It made deep shadows in the quiet night, and there was no sound of joy, only the rustle of leaves or stir of some dreaming bird to relieve the stillness. And one grave was a reminder of love that challenged eternity. A sensation of instability swept him like a cold wind. He shivered slightly.

"Forgive me," said Mrs. Follinsbee softly.

"Rather, I must ask you to pardon my stupidity." He came to attention with visible effort.

"I did n't mean to wound you."

"You've nothing to be sorry for. I encouraged questions."

"Anyway, I am sorry," she said. "Now we've dropped the personal."

"Not yet." His eyes were on the ship's foamy wake that stretched to thinness in the moonlight. "There's an explanation I'd like to make."

"But I don't ask any," she protested.

"That's not it," he pursued. "It's not for your benefit or mine. Only, — I'm afraid you may misunderstand. I was married, but I'm not now. There's nothing scandalous in it. She died. And she was a splendid girl. There was never a truer heart than hers."

He paused, and the urgent appeal of the "Blue Danube" came to their ears as they stood in silence.

"Was it long ago?" she asked.

"About a year."

"I think you are very brave," she said. Her voice was gravely tender.

"Don't misunderstand me —" he began.

"Of course not," she said quickly, laying an arresting hand upon his arm. "I understand perfectly."

What could he say? He was again invested with the regalia of nobility.

"Would you like to dance?" he asked abruptly.

"No, thank you. Not to-night. I'm a little tired, and in need of sleep."

"Shall I find Mr. Follinsbee for you?"

"No, thank you, again. It is n't necessary. He is doubtless absorbed in bridge."

"Then I'll at least let him know you've turned in," he suggested.

"He won't look for me." She smiled, but her look was a little weary. "I'll only trouble you to take me below."

She gave him her hand in parting. "Auf wiedersehen."

"I'm very glad," he said, "it's not 'Good-bye.'"

When she had disappeared, he stood uncertain. It was not late, and the beauty of the night called him again above. So he walked and smoked. He noted now what was not evident before, murmurs from dusky corners and the confidential carriage of pairs that went steadily back and forth. A few unattached women with a maritime license to flirt regarded him curiously, but he had no eye for adventure.

He indulged in fragmentary speculation as he tramped steadily on. "What manner of ass was Follinsbee, who so ignored his wife?" And how he had misjudged Mrs. Follinsbee, mistaking her for a brassy flirt. She seemed a plucky, cheerful little woman, with some big trouble in her life. Not that she had suggested it. He had just glimpsed it in her look and manner as they parted. He had unwittingly appealed to her sympathy. But the unintentional pose must stand. He could n't explain without belittling Eleanor, who had so richly deserved devotion he could not give. Nobody, not even another woman, could understand. Mrs. Follinsbee, though, was uncommonly quick to feel and catch a thought. He remembered her short upper lip and her trick of slightly closing her eyes when she smiled, so that merriment was reflected rather than directly revealed.

His cigar was out, and he tossed it into the water. There was no more music. Without looking at his watch he knew it was late, and breathed deeply by way of farewell to the night before going to his stateroom.

On the stairway he met a woman, cloaked and moving quickly. He had only a vague idea of her appearance as he stepped aside to let her pass. But he stopped and looked after her, a perfume of exotic suggestion assailing his nostrils. He associated it with a woman who looked like a Circassian, a golden-haired beauty in a Paris café. There was no special

reason why he should remember her. He had merely wondered at the waste of such loveliness on the effusive little Frenchman with waxed mustache and corseted figure, who apparently owned her. Now he indulged in speculation on the errand that had taken the cloaked woman on deck so late at night. But he was not actively curious.

His mind turned to the perplexing fact that it was so easy to be a little interested in any attractive woman who happened in one's way, and so hard to give one's self completely. Egotism was not the bar. For himself he had no notion that he was more worthy of respect and love than the majority of men. They were all faulty fellows. But women were so fatuously blind. They seemed bent on glorifying the male creature, and happiest when the creature, putting modesty behind him, consented to play the rôle assigned. For the happiness of humanity, perhaps it was better so. Man, turned poet in courtship, relapsed to matter-of-fact nature in the grind of labor for livelihood. Content on one side and love on the other, that seemed the basis of successful marriage. But when there was content on one side and discontent on the other, there was — the Follinsbees, for instance.

His leisurely reflections, as he prepared for bed, were interrupted by a heavy sigh from his cabin mate. It was a teacher of languages with a timid tongue. When he saw him, spectacled and round-shouldered with fingers curved as though clasping

a book, Strong knew he had drawn a social zero. But that was no cause for grief. He felt thankful Fate had not visited him with a wine agent or a student. Distant engines that drove tirelessly through the night hummed pleasantly as he drifted to sleep.

He woke to daylight and a feeling of oppression. There was good air and elbow-room, but a stranger's presence accentuated the impression of close quarters. With the Atlantic Ocean outside, why lie listening to sedate snores? He dressed quietly and went on deck. There were no passengers in sight, only stewards and deck-hands beginning their morning's work. It was clear and warm. Without hindrance the waxing sun shone on waves that sparkingly pursued one another like glittering notes of a scale. Gulls played in their crests. Nature was in jocund mood, and Strong responded to it. He knew his corner would be sunny, and he sought his chair for a morning smoke.

Was somebody in his chair? It seemed so at a distance. Then he concluded it must be his neighbor on the exposed left. Probably uninteresting or repugnant, but the pill must be taken sometime; best have it over. He kept on, and wondered what was familiar in the woman whose back was presented as she sat looking aft, not pensively but in sympathy with the exhilarant scene. Then she turned, following a flight of birds, and he saw it was Mrs. Follinsbee.

"So it's you," he called, quickening his steps.

"And you," she answered with a little gesture of welcome. "What luck. Our 'Protective Association' was evidently preordained."

"I don't believe much in ordination, or foreordination, or damnation," he said, as he sank into his chair, "but just now I take a great deal of stock in luck."

"And yet," she rejoined, with a glance of appraisal, "you wear an opal."

"It's neutralized now by a 'Land Symphony' at sea."

"I don't hear it."

"See it," he corrected, looking frank approval. "No, you have n't a mirror. Brown hair, brown eyes, brown dress, and brown shoes. Stockings, too, I suppose. Thanks. And a brown flower, not to mention a brown toque. Is it a toque? Thanks again. All harmonious, all admirable. May I say, charming?"

"You may." A crinkling smile grew to laughter, and he saw her teeth flash white, with a charming irregularity. "Last night I called you prosaic. This morning you're as gallant as John Drew in a drawing-room comedy. What is the explanation?"

"I can't say 'You,' for you were yourself, last night." He drew strongly on his cigarette, and gave a smoke spiral critical attention. "It's just my alter ego, I guess," he said at length. "I grow funereal at night."

"What would become of romance without it?" she suggested lightly.

"I don't know. And is that so important? What we need is n't more romance; it's more reality. Fewer marriages, and more divorces."

"Do you believe in divorce?"

She tossed the question easily, but there was an earnest undertone.

"Of course, never having had one," he replied promptly. "Do you believe in romance?"

"Yes," she said pensively, "never having had one." Then she added, turning with a look of piquant challenge: "If I accept your belief, will you adopt mine?"

He thrilled pleasantly, and bent upon her a glance of half-humorous, half-tender interrogation, "I can conceive of no better bargain."

From the tension of the moment they mutually retreated.

"Let's walk," she said briskly. "We're not earning our breakfast. Besides, I must guard against the sad surplus."

"You don't look overweight," he pronounced judicially, as they got under way.

"Thanks. But this is one of the cases in which appearance does not precede fact."

"The poets," he observed, dexterously striking a match, "cry out that things are not what they seem. It seems to me much more deplorable that things are what they seem."

"Do you see straight?"

"I think so. Of course, none of us can fix the neighbor next door with binocular vision."

"Paxton," she said promptly. "Do you paint?"

"No, I'm one of the carping Pharisees. Do you?"

"A little. I like to think I can earn my living, if need be."

He stepped ahead and bowed with deference.

"Are you in need of a model, ma'am?"

"I think the sea is more paintable," she said nonchalantly.

"I need breakfast badly." He turned her dexterously toward the companionway. "Only bacon and eggs can sustain me." Then he added, over his shoulder: "Do I get any reward for foregoing the obvious pun?"

"Most persons," she replied, "get what they deserve, or deserve what they get."

"And this," he sighed, "before breakfast."

The Carvers were before them, eating a breakfast he would have guessed that Mrs. Carver had ordered. Through the veil of orthodoxy that clung to her as morning mist, she regarded Strong and Mrs. Follinsbee with disapproval.

"Mr. Follinsbee is not with you," she observed presently, after an investigation into the character of an egg.

"I believe not," responded Mrs. Follinsbee, placidly appropriating a remark apparently addressed to all comers.

"Is he very ill?" pursued her inquisitor.

"I don't think so. I don't think he is ill at all." As if on afterthought, she added: "If you happen to want him, I think by this time he may be in the smoking-room."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Carver belligerently. She seemed for a few moments to be impartially chewing her food and the cud of thought, and deriving little satisfaction from either. Her thirst for information was by no means slaked. A copy of "The Purple Flower" beside Mrs. Follinsbee's plate drew her next attack.

"Are you reading that immoral book?" she demanded.

"Is it immoral?" asked Mrs. Follinsbee innocently.

"It is difficult," said Mrs. Carver with elephantine delicacy, "to discuss the matter with gentlemen present."

"I've been married," interposed Strong cheerfully, "and it looks as if Mr. Carver had been. I think we can stand the shock of what you want to say."

"Men are bad enough," she said tartly, with a knowing glance that traveled to Mrs. Follinsbee. "But some questions the sexes can't discuss."

"Perhaps," he suggested, "you think Ralsworthy mixes them too much in his story."

"What do you think when a man trapes after three women, and not one of them his wife?" She put down her knife and fork to give more force to the interrogation.

"That would depend," he said easily, "upon what kind of women they were."

Mrs. Carver rose majestically. "James," she said, "have you finished breakfast." Her tone was in no sense interrogative.

"Yes, yes," answered Mr. Carver, and departed with egg resident in the corner of his mouth.

Follinsbee entered as they left. He was not the kind of man that looks best in the morning after his bath. And he was not the kind of man that looks well in the evening, when wine and lamplight transform. Strong wondered if he ever looked well at all. The Lewantic afforded no opportunity to see him on the links. He seemed at breakfast as he had seemed at dinner, dull and amiable, with too much flesh.

"Have a good evenin'?" he inquired of Mrs. Follinsbee, after a casual nod for Strong.

"Fair," she said, rather listlessly. "How did you make out?"

"Four rubbers. Good crowd." He examined a plate of griddle-cakes solicitously.

"Do you play this morning?" she asked carelessly.

"Promised a feller satisfaction." He lifted his eyes from his plate, and Strong fancied he saw in their placid shallows a trace of surprise. "You don't want me?" he said.

"Oh, I shall sketch," she remarked. "Mr. Strong has promised to be my model."

"All right. Maybe see you before luncheon." He had the bulletin by wireless now, and read as he ate.

"Don't let the news spoil your breakfast," she said. "We'll go along now."

"Yes," he answered absently, not lifting his head. "Bye, Alice."

"You wonder why I announced you as my model," she said when they were outside.

"Why, no," he assured her.

"It was just to settle you in attendance," she explained. "But maybe I take too much for granted."

"Nonsense," he said.

"Of course, he does n't care," she continued. "He's always relieved to know I have any one to amuse me."

"Do you feel so sure?" he asked, taking her arm to steady her.

"Quite sure; and I abhor the wholly settled."

He did not return the ball of thought, and she switched to the commonplace: "Please send a steward for my sketching kit."

When she was comfortably settled, he smoked in silence and watched her work. It was a study of a rollicking sea, sketched vigorously with apt suggestion of structure that astonished him. There was a little frown between her eyes, and she puckered her lips, as if to whistle, in the absorption of her work. The sunlight on the water was rather dazzling.

Strong shaded his face, indolently watching, and presently she leaned back, closing her eyes.

"Will you have a cigarette?" he said, extending his case.

"No, thank you."

"Have a compliment, then."

"Not ready-made."

"'Alice Follinsbee,'" he suggested, "is a very pretty name."

"You don't appear curious concerning its owner." She regarded him with half-closed eyes.

"'Serene I fold my hands and wait,'" he rejoined, suiting action to word.

"That sounds more arrogant than I think you intend it to." There was a hint of resentment in her voice.

"If it sounds arrogant at all, it is misleading. I am interested, but not curious."

His eyes were fixed on a lone cloud that suggested a camel loping across a blue desert. Her eyes were on the horizon, but she was not conscious of its detail, as she sat tapping her chair without rhythm.

"I'd like to know," he suggested presently.

"What?"

"Particularly, why."

"There's nothing extraordinary in it." Her eyes narrowed reflectively "I suppose it's common enough to be typical. I was a girl of good family, and the family was impoverished. Honest labor for

a living was never considered. You know Virginia, and the 'F.F.V.'s.'"

He nodded, and waited expectantly. She went on, twisting her brush with impatience at thronging associations.

"I was held for the first eligible bidder. There would be no coercion, of course, but a dutiful girl was relied upon to be properly considerate of her parents. Before I was twenty, Mr. Follinsbee appeared on business and remained to make love. He was amiable; he was rich. I never thought I loved him, but — he was n't so stout then, and I was charmed by his playing."

"His playing?"

Strong looked his astonishment. She met it with a slightly bitter smile.

"Yes, he plays the piano beautifully. I still think so. Of course, that's no reason for marriage. I'm not one of the women to whom life is announced in a universal menu. I've devoted the better part of eight years to increasing realization that it can't be. There's no tale of the brute, or dark mystery to be whispered. Just plain incompatibility; lethargy on one side, and discontent on the other. Come to see us at Hastings-on-the-Hudson. We have an excellent house, but no home."

He appeared unconscious she was no longer speaking. His cigar burned steadily, and he seemed enveloped in a haze.

"Do you blame me?" she asked at length.

"I blame no woman," he said seriously.

"Either wrong, or right?"

"She is entitled to be either."

"I fear," she said a little coldly, "your sympathy is too catholic."

"It's protestant for you."

He turned to meet her eyes that lightened at his look and words.

"You're a dear," she said, settling herself for work again. "But you're a bit difficult to understand."

Afterwards there was little said. Conversation came in spurts, with interludes of comfortable understanding.

"What are you planning?" he asked, after a lazy silence.

"Nothing. I'm drifting," she answered, turning her head to get a wave effect.

"Why not try Lambury?" he suggested.

"Oh," she said, unwittingly disclosing a change of vision. "Does he take pupils?"

"At Gonquit in summer their umbrellas are like daisies in a field. He's a good teacher, I hear. Anyway, he's the only man in America who can paint a sea that makes one hold his breath."

"Yes, I know he is." She scraped a bit, and examined the result. "Next summer is a long way off, and he's in Boston now, with no pupils in the field, pied or otherwise. But I must do something."

He offered no further suggestion, and talk relapsed

to idle observation. At luncheon there was peace, with stagnation. Mrs. Carver and her personally conducted spouse had come very early or were coming equally late. The question of which impaired nobody's enjoyment of their absence. Follinsbee contributed what was apparently his regular statement, a total of rubbers at bridge. It occurred to Strong that he remotely suggested a jelly-fish. He was slightly restive and excused himself on a plea of letters he must write. He chided himself for it a few minutes later. Yesterday he had not known Mrs. Follinsbee. Now he trumped up an explanation as if she were his wife. He spent the afternoon in the smoking-room, where it was dull, and the card-room, where it was worse.

He was seated at dinner when the Follinsbees entered. And Mrs. Follinsbee was an attractive stranger. The woman who has managed to charm in the morning has an ace in reserve. Strong was a little hazy on detail, though clear enough as to effect. It was cerise or old rose that she wore, made simply, with inconspicuous ornaments of dull gold. She was almost beautiful. Suffering his eyes to speak, he raised his glass in salutation.

"Very charming," he said.

"Which," she queried, "my frock or me?"

"Both," he rejoined, smiling.

"Do you like my dress?" she pursued, preening slightly.

"More than any aboard," he said promptly.

Follinsbee momentarily forsook his beef.

"I bought it," he observed, not pointedly, but as one might mention proprietorship of a horse or yacht.

"A most excellent choice," Strong commented flatly.

Mrs. Follinsbee said nothing. The rest of dinner was devoted to discussion of food and steamship companies, which interested Follinsbee, and religion, which interested Mrs. Carver, as would any bone of contention. Usually indifferent to the uninteresting, Strong was freakishly disposed to entertain. It amused him to extract even from the down-trodden Carver some uncensored comment.

"Let me decorate you," said Mrs. Follinsbee, as he escorted her to the promenade deck.

"For what?" he asked, stooping to receive the flower pinned to his lapel.

"For meritorious service."

"It was n't under fire," he said, "but I thank the government."

"It will always be grateful."

She spoke lightly, as he pressed her hand. It seemed a proper *quid pro quo*. A spirit of buoyant irresponsibility wrapped them for the hour. Time stood still and circumstance held aloof. The music, the veiled moon, and softness of air through which the liner rushed over a sedate sea, — all contributed to intoxication that sharpened sense and softened conscience.

"Will you dance to-night?" Strong asked, a sudden burst of barbaric rhythm setting his nerves a-tingle.

"On this night of nights," she said whimsically. "Why have you been so slow to ask?"

"Because I am always slow, I suppose. *Peccavi*. And now, let's lose no more time."

They danced well together. From the first Strong had no doubt. Mrs. Follinsbee responded to the music with absorption that banished craving for conversation. They followed the music down spacious corridors tenanted by themselves alone.

"You are a silent partner," she said, as they strolled on deck.

"I don't like to talk and dance at the same time," he explained.

"Again the unusual man," she remarked. "But I like it. If dancing interferes with conversation, it should be given up."

"There seems to be a good deal in life that should be given up," he observed irrelevantly. They halted aft, and stood by the rail.

"Sometimes," she said, "we are sorry for the surrender."

Neither spoke. His hand touched hers; his eyes were on her face, as she looked with hooded eyes to sea. Perhaps she inclined toward him slightly. She did not resist as he drew her to him gently. It was not a feverish kiss. Rather it was a pledge of something expected, and to be fulfilled. She gave it char-

acter, as she had furnished initiative. What Strong had contributed was not quite clear to himself. He tried to determine, after they had separated without the indelicacy of verbal pledge.

"You damned fool," he said to himself, as he stood before the mirror.

"I beg pardon," came a voice from the dusky corner occupied by the teacher of languages.

"Talking to myself," said Strong without turning; "or rather, I was cussing a collar button. It's a foolish habit."

Other foolishness he was guilty of continued to rasp his nerves when he was in bed. To what had he committed himself? And to what did Mrs. Follinsbee think he had committed himself? He was not in love with her. But he had behaved as if he were. It would be rather shabby to play the Artful Dodger now. Anyway, it was quite possible that he overestimated the seriousness of her view. Why should he assume that she felt more than a passing interest in him? It was cheeky to put a literal construction on remarks by moonlight. With this negative comfort he drifted to sleep.

Next day nothing occurred to upset his self-indulgent theory. Mrs. Follinsbee was cordial, but not clinging. She seemed to assume the permanency of their relationship, that was all. So Strong, finding no cause for alarm, permitted himself to experience pique. Was it, then, a mere flirtatious episode that he had raised to the dignity of a major adventure?

He tested the situation with slight overtures. Mrs. Follinsbee was not cold; neither was she flax to the flame.

If Follinsbee saw anything disquieting, he kept it to himself. Strong found his blankness irritating. Sometimes he suspected the existence of active intelligence behind a heavy mask. After Follinsbee played it was at least evident that nature, creating his body gross, had played an impish joke. That some one had supplemented it was evidently the impression of passengers who heard he would contribute to the ship's concert. Could anything beautiful come from this mountain of flesh?

It was some minutes before they recovered from surprise sufficiently to appreciate the quality of Follinsbee's touch and technique. Strong took note of the rippling prelude, like the rapid flow of a silvery stream. He knew what was coming, with the entrance of a melody mysteriously sweet as music sifted through whispering trees. It was the "F minor Ballade." On it went, with its solemn narrative, its savage thunder, its glittering arabesques. It was psychically queer. He had a notion of Chopin animating an automaton, only there was nothing obviously mechanical in Follinsbee's playing. No vices of the virtuoso, no shoddy sentimentalism. It was playing elastic, warmly emotional, beautifully proportioned. When he had finished he did not rise and bow. Applause was spontaneous, but he did not even turn his head. He only mopped his face. Then

he played again, — a Schubert Impromptu, brilliant, sparkling. Again applause rained upon him and he seemed not to heed. He rose laboriously, and came placidly to where Strong sat with Mrs. Follinsbee. So he might come from breakfast, or a round of golf. There was no elation in face or manner, no emotion at all.

"You play superbly," said Strong impulsively.

"I used to play," he answered lifelessly.

He reached for a cigarette, and replaced his case, remembering where he was. His hand was small and well-shaped. Belonging to an attractive person, it would have been called a sensitive hand.

The next day they picked up Nantucket by wireless, and the Lewantic's passengers began to think of land. Here and there began intimacy associated with preparation for customs inspectors. Having nothing to smuggle, Strong was at ease.

"Can I take anything through for you?" he inquired of Mrs. Follinsbee.

"I've burdened you enough, already," she answered.

"It is n't making me round-shouldered."

"When shall I see you in Hastings?"

"Whenever you want me."

"You know that is always."

He did not answer, but pressed her hand.

"I have a hard time ahead," she said presently.

"I don't like to leave you early, this last night; but it must be done. You understand, don't you?"

"I'm very grateful for all you've given me."

He hesitated a moment, then kissed her on the cheek. Suddenly, — he could not tell how it happened, — her arms were about his neck. He held her closely. Their lips met, and he felt her soul. No word was spoken. She slipped from his arms, and his eyes followed her, walking swiftly down the deck. He was shaken, as a boatman swept suddenly from his moorings.

Mrs. Follinsbee did not appear at breakfast. Follinsbee, however, was present, and seemed to Strong less attentive than usual to food. Once or twice he looked as if he had something to say. When Strong rose he pushed his chair back and ponderously followed suit.

"Like to see you a few minutes," he said in a tone meant to be interrogative.

"Certainly," replied Strong. What was in the wind now?

"The smokin'-room," said Follinsbee, leading.

"Smoke?" he inquired, extending his cigar-case when they were seated.

"Thanks," said Strong, settling back and waiting for him to begin.

"Rather disagreeable, but got to do it." Follinsbee's tone was not belligerent. Rather it was nervous, almost apologetic. "Can't have this affair with my wife goin' on. Must object, decidedly."

"What do you mean?" asked Strong. There was no use in assuming anything.

Follinsbee pulled at his collar, and the red in his face deepened.

"You know," he said, picking at his cigar-case.

"That Mrs. Follinsbee is a charming woman. I enjoy her society. Do you object to that?"

He spoke pleasantly and coolly. Follinsbee opened his mouth, as a fish opens its mouth when taken from water, but did not speak. Then he rose laboriously.

"You know," he reiterated, like one reciting a lesson. Then he found more words. "Must stop, or I shall take steps to stop it."

"I am very sorry you take that attitude," said Strong stiffly.

Follinsbee did not return his bow. He was hastening clumsily from an unpleasant situation.

Strong saw Mrs. Follinsbee only once afterward. They were disembarking and the pier was crowded. She came suddenly to view, but they did not speak, for Follinsbee was with her. He got only an appealing glance. She entered a cab, and the door closed, not sharply as in stories, but carefully after her corpulent guardian. Strong wondered how there could be room for even a petite person with so huge an individual. He stood staring glumly after the receding vehicle when his partner, Grant, a hearty fellow, slapped him on the back.

"What's the matter, old chap?" demanded the jovial one.

"A touch of sun, I think," Strong explained with careless air.

"Sure it is n't a petticoat?" joked Grant. Then he remembered Strong's comparatively recent bereavement, and flushed with embarrassment. "Ready for a good American cocktail?" he asked hastily.

"Welcome words." Strong assented heartily. "Lead on."

The club was the same; his rooms unchanged, and work went on in the office as before. For a week or two he lived in a state of expectancy, anticipating he knew not what. Then the mood passed, and memory blurred, once briefly revived by a sprig of rosemary. It came from Hastings-on-the-Hudson, and there was no message other than its mute appeal. Not knowing what to do, he did nothing.

It was winter, after the holidays, when he heard from Mrs. Follinsbee next. She was in Paris, she wrote, waiting for "things to be straightened out." She had not written before because the situation was so chaotic. Now there were signs of clarification, in a most unexpected way. "Fred" — that was Mr. Follinsbee — had become interested in an opera singer, who seemed able to extend admiration for his playing to his person. "Naturally, he likes it," she wrote, "and I like it, too. Happiness for him means, I hope, happiness for me." Then she asked for a photograph or two of his rooms. "I know you well enough to be sure the walls are not littered with steins, and foils, and photographs of stage ladies;

but besides what you avoid, I'd like to know what you have. Then I can visualize you at home."

He sent her the photographs, with a semi-affectionate letter. How to address her was a puzzle at first. Finally he settled upon, "Dear Alice." He could hardly do less with a lady who had intimated her inclination to become his wife. Anyway, "Dear" was elastic. It might mean a great deal, or it might signify merely the familiarity of friendship. The body of his letter was studiously discreet. He wrote of the opera, the newest production and the freshest scandal; of a comedy that succeeded without a Coneyized version of Fifth Avenue, or an undergraduate interpretation of a chorus girl's domestic life. He touched Tammany with tongs, and dwelt somewhat upon the open winter. But of anything vital between them there was no word. He signed it all, "Yours considerably," and sealed it with disgust. No phantom of modesty any longer concealed the fact that he was neither accepting nor disavowing responsibility for a step he had tacitly encouraged. And that step was to alter for good or ill a woman's life.

Face to face, he would not have shrunk from the issue. He knew he did not love Mrs. Follinsbee, and he had not forgotten that marriage without love was a sacrament of husks. But how could he write denying what had never been affirmed. Could he say, "Please do not take it for granted that I meant anything serious in kissing you on the

Lewantic." A woman in his position might tactfully and tenderly serve an injunction on a man. But a man could not move thus without seeming brutal. It was not a prerogative of his sex.

Mrs. Follinsbee was a clever woman. He banked on that, and trusted she would understand. But the defect of his quality defeated his desire. Timidity was mistaken for reticence, as reticence had been mistaken for delicacy. He was somewhat dismayed by her reply. "You were a dear," she wrote, "to send the photographs. The chair next the fireplace I have taken for my own. You'll find me there when you come late from the office. I say 'late' because I am apt to be out at chifon affairs; and anyway, there's nothing so deadly in the long run as always meeting the expected. Don't I know!" In the end she wrote: "All this fantastic, but phantasy is truth, is n't it? I've lived so long in unrelieved black and white, I can hardly believe I'm going into colors. There may be definite news soon."

A little later she sent him a photograph. It was a charming likeness, not idealized but posed with an artist's sagacity. The natural sheen of golden-brown was hinted at in hair piled softly on the head that topped a roundly slender neck. There was a hint of roguishness in the mouth, but the eyes dominated, anticipatory yet serene. Her dress was simple and square cut, somehow contributing to girlish appearance. Not the photograph, one would have said, of a woman weary and disillusioned. Rather

the face of a woman, young and lovely, who looks forward without regret. "I hope you will like it," she wrote; "it was taken for you, as a reward for the photographs you sent, and your delicacy about asking for mine. I wonder if you would always realize that the light rein is the tightest."

Strong regarded her picture with admiration, and her letter with dismay. "What is left to say," he wrote, "to one who so completely anticipates and understands?" He had a feeling that the expression was alluringly enigmatic, but could not force his hand to write plain prose. Having slept with the problem, he resorted to a strategic stroke. The rosemary she had sent rested with Kitty's rose. Kitty was gone beyond all but the last recall. But Mrs. Follinsbee was a beautiful danger. He inclosed the rosemary without comment, feeling a bit virtuous the while. For was he not saving her in saving himself? She would free herself from Follinsbee, anyway. He had merely accelerated the inevitable. Again he had difficulty in parting salutation. "Yours considerably" was rather neat, perhaps, but would hardly bear repetition. "Yours sincerely," "Yours truly," — were stodgily commonplace. "Yours affectionately" had a domestic sound. It was easy enough to be ardent on paper, but that would n't do. He finally signed himself, "Yours." No name or initials.

After the letter was dispatched misgiving assailed him. Had he been too subtle? Return of the rose-

mary might be construed as assurance of faithful remembrance. But weeks went eventless, and the baseball season opened. Apprehension evaporated.

Summer had slipped in when Strong received a formidable document from Paris. It lay on his desk when he returned to his rooms, one evening, an official-looking communication, long and bulky. Braced as a criminal to receive his sentence, he opened it deliberately. It was an attested copy of a divorce granted Fred and Alice Follinsbee of Hastings-on-the-Hudson, in the State of New York, on the ground of desertion, with mutual benefit in permission to marry again.

There was no explanatory message, only the official notice. The shackles had been struck off. Mrs. Follinsbee was free from a husband she did not love. Should he give her a husband who did not love her? Once he had undertaken such a task without realizing all it involved. With eyes open, was he foolish enough to try it again? "Foolish" was the word he used to himself. He needed to be blunt, for deceitful sympathy was desire to spare his own feelings as much as disinclination to wound her. He was tempted to cable, throwing discretion to the wind. With her photograph before him, facing her mute appeal, he sat till night was far advanced. Then he paid a last tribute. He kissed her regretfully, and laid her away. To the notice of her release he applied a lighted match. Fanned by a light breeze, it burned briskly to ashes. He felt weary,

not as one exhausted in stirring combat, but dull, and dreary as a drudge. He saw his own face in the mirror as the face of a stranger. "I wonder," he muttered, "that it does n't show."

Having accomplished the overthrow of impulse to be generous and indiscreet, he retreated from renewal of pressure. He took to the woods, though it was not the season for gunning, and fishing was a bore. There was Damerel, with his steam-heated game preserves for autumn, and his well-screened bungalow for summer. Damerel called it a "bungalow," though it looked more like a cross between a château and a city hall. Strong's firm had designed it, or rather they had modified Damerel's perverse plans. What he had wanted associated characteristics of a bull ring and a cathedral. But Damerel's friends were not finicky on questions of architecture. They regarded rather the excellence of plumbing, the capacity of his ice chest, and the quality of his wine cellar. They were a horsey crowd, hard riders and high livers, devoted to gambling and addicted to women. They drank and hunted, rode and swore like squires of the Georgian period. There were women to match.

People featured in court reports and upon the society page of the avid press were not Strong's natural associates. Not that he objected to them on moral grounds. But their raucous gayety irritated him, like a hair-brush drawn across the face. He knew what to expect of them. It would be fishing

or flirting in the morning, riding or tennis in the afternoon, bridge at night, and drinking whenever there was nothing else to do. Yet he accepted Damerel's invitation, given carelessly in casual meeting, as it had been given and declined a dozen times before. He was anxious to get away, somewhere, anywhere, and to establish a fresh chain of thought. As one setting a block signal against danger from the rear, he boarded a train for Ontario, with instruction that no mail be forwarded.

Frivolity in the wilds was what he anticipated. He was not happy, but he was very busy. Distrustful of chance, he played the rôle of universal substitute. He was the ever available fourth at tennis and bridge, and the morning squire of ladies who had drunk less deeply, or with less deplorable results, than their sworn cavaliers. That the female was the weaker sex seemed by no means clear to Strong, as he contemplated in morning's unflattering light the dewy freshness of fair ones who had dallied with wine the night before. He had respect for their constitutions, and their grandmothers' lives. They interested him as specimens rather than as individuals.

The one exception was Mrs. Ormsby. He disliked her. She was a widow by process of nature. That she had not replaced the husband who broke his neck in the hunting field seemed strange to Strong, for she was attractive in a way and obviously

fond of masculine society. He thought, the first time he saw her, of a painting of one of the Medici women, who came to a commonplace violent end. She was tall and athletically slender, with straight black brows and hair of dusky black that seemed to take its tone from the imperious nose and the wide, firm mouth, a trifle hard. Her eyes were positively black, a rare quality that arrested attention until the primary fact was eclipsed by a suggestion of smouldering fire. What would be the effect were fires stimulated to free flame? He wondered without any desire to undertake a stoker's work. At least, he was not conscious of desire to do so. Her conspicuous characteristics he disapproved as "unfeminine." She smoked too many cigarettes; preferred highballs to champagne, and poker to bridge. Both clothes and vocabulary advertised her ostentatiously. There was something fanatical in her persistent gayety. Once in Algiers he had seen an Arab dancer straining frenziedly towards the unseen until he fell, suddenly as if a knife severed the cord of life.

What Mrs. Ormsby thought of him was not evident, for he neither offered allegiance nor suffered enrollment by draft. Until the day of his departure he had no reason to suppose that she thought of him at all. They met by chance, if there is chance in human relations.

He was walking before breakfast, for Damerel's woods teemed with beauty Damerel never saw. Soothed by filtered sunshine and the cheer of birds,

he kept to gravelled walks until sudden impulse to follow a brook rollicking under a foot-bridge was followed without demur. Sauntering along, he rounded a point and came suddenly upon the woman he least expected to meet. She was seated on a fallen tree, barefoot and dabbling her feet in the stream.

They became aware of each other's presence at about the same moment, and Strong was embarrassed. Mrs. Ormsby was not obviously so. She did not change her position.

"I beg your pardon," he said confusedly, only pausing to apologize. "I had no thought of intruding."

"Of course not," she conceded promptly. "Don't go." Her look was slightly mocking as he stood irresolute.

"You're not afraid, are you?" she inquired.

He flushed, defenseless.

"No," he said stiffly, but making no move to seat himself. "If I can be of any service?"

"You can," she rejoined coolly, and stooped to examine a foot withdrawn from the water. It was a charming foot, shapely and without blemish. "I want to ask you a question," she continued.

"I shall be delighted to answer," he assured her without enthusiasm.

"Why do you dislike me?"

"But I don't," he protested.

"But you do," she asserted, not heatedly, as one stating a self-evident fact.

"It's impolite," he said bluntly, "to call a lady a liar."

"I believe so," she conceded; then thrust again. "But you don't regard me as a lady."

"If you have X-rayed my mind, there's no need to question me." He bowed stiffly and turned to go.

"Only the substance is very thick in spots, and the impression blurs." She made no effort to detain him, but sat contentedly waggling her toes in the pool. "You seem to me," she added, as one conferring information, "a simple young man."

"Thank you," he said with evident choler.

The enemy pressed hard, with no chance of reprisal.

"And a very good young man," she added.

"It is a comfort to hear it," he retorted, "from so good a judge."

Being thus stung to rudeness, he nodded curtly and hastened away. He did not look back. A faint smile hovered about Mrs. Ormsby's mouth as she watched harsh treatment of bush or bough obstructing his path. He did not meet her at breakfast. "She's sleeping it off," some one crassly suggested when her absence was noted. That she did not appear before one of Damerel's motors whisked him over the long road to the railway station was a relief. He suffered the chagrin of a man who feels that a woman has laughed at him. Indifference may be painful, but derision is unforgivable affront. With Strong, however, anger was brief. After all, he

would never see her again. What did he care about what she thought of him? He took from his pocket a well-thumbed copy of Conrad's "Lord Jim," and presently forgot woman's perversity in fickle cruelty of the sea.

Coming down the Hudson, his mind reverted to the problem dodged but not disposed of. What if he found a direct summons from Mrs. Follinsbee? It would be his duty to refuse response, for her sake more than his own. With some weeks of intervening activity, the problem had grown easier of solution. Still, it would be abominably awkward to humiliate a woman in that way. At once hopeful and slightly apprehensive, he pondered the possibility.

There was nothing to worry him in accumulated mail. A few bills, a fistful of circulars, and an invitation for a week-end already past, — that was all. He felt guilty and relieved, but mostly the latter. The room seemed very hot and stuffy. It would be cool at the club, with something cool to drink. Further, it was lunch time, and he needed the society of rational men. It would be doubly good after weeks with people who took life casually, though by no means as innocently, as children.

The world is large to one in loneliness, but small in the dovetailing of chance relationships. Mrs. Follinsbee did not reappear on Strong's horizon. For a time she came to mind frequently. He wondered where she was, and what life had done to her. But active interests pressed, and finally he thought of her

no more. It was spring again when she was suddenly recalled to mind.

He was calling on Mrs. Decrow, lately returned from abroad, and listening to praise of Paris.

"It chirks me up," she declared, with a vigorous nod. "I know it's old, but its spirits never flag. It makes me feel there is no need of giving up. One lump or two?" She paused a second with the sugar tongs, then impulsively plumped a second lump into his cup. "Two is best," she rattled on. "You need sweetening. I am shocked to think that even in your Beaux-Arts days you had no eye for the *grisette*, who lives to be loved. Sometimes I think the oldest people on earth are the young."

She sighed humorously, and he regarded her with a faint smile.

"Bless me!" she went on, with sudden access of vivacity. "I forgot to tell you that I met a friend of yours in Paris."

"Who was it?" he asked with polite interest.

"A Mrs. Follinsbee. Oh, I'm sorry you've spilled your tea. Those cups are so teetery. Let me give you another."

"You're charitable. I fear I was awkward," he said, mopping his knee. "Where did you meet Mrs. Follinsbee?"

"At the Salon first, and afterward at the Brices'. Then I took to her, for she's a pretty dear. Never a cat. Most of us, I must admit, are a bit vicious at times."

"What was she doing in Paris?" he asked with careful carelessness.

"Trying to decide whether she would get married. An English secretary of legation was her shadow, night and day. Why do you American men let Europeans steal our best girls that way? You ought to know. You're one of the inactive ones."

"Would you have me a professional Romeo?" He regarded her ironically as he put the question that so craved utterance. "Where do I come in?"

"Don't be vain," she said indulgently. "I have no bonbon for you. I mentioned you one day at the Brices', and she asked if you were an architect. I said 'Yes,' and it came out that she crossed with you on the Lewantic, two years ago. Of course, I scented a romance, but there was nothing in the trail."

"She did n't ask about me, then?" he said casually.

"She only asked if you were not a very retiring man."

"It's later than I thought," he remarked with sudden interest in his watch. "Time flies with you."

"Why don't you flatter young women prettily?" she railed, as he rose to go.

"Because they are less deserving," he rejoined.

Outside he permitted himself a personal observation. "I made too much of it," he said as he lighted a cigarette. "She was n't hard hit, after all."

CHAPTER XI

THERE is a period of slack water between the ebb and flow, just at the turn of the tide. So it is in men's lives. Strong swung into the thirties through placid years. If he had not grown in grace, he flattered himself he had advanced in discretion. By no means shunning society, he avoided emphasizing attentions. And mothers of the marriageable came to regard him with slackening interest. He belonged to the class carried in mental memorandum: "May marry some day." So he amused the *débutante*, took up golf, and joined another club.

And professional life went no less smoothly. A junior partnership with Carter & Hastings was a large prize for one of his age. He might have been elated, but he was only mildly amused. It seemed rather droll that a plugger of no particular talent should so succeed in one of the arts. Sometimes he had a feeling that he would gladly exchange assured position for a creative thrill with the plain of combat ahead. But he always denied that later. He was one to whom the major passions, the great joys and the deep sorrows of life were denied. And Fortune, chancing to be in compensatory mood, gave him comfort in exchange. He saw his logical apogee, — plump, well-groomed, stratified in intellect, and a little short of breath, in the club window at four on sunny afternoons.

Man is astute, but masked batteries of Fate are cunningly placed. The summer Strong would have gone to Norway, if Pearsall had not suddenly deprived him of a companion by inconsiderately taking a wife, he went to Mauwusset instead. Mauwusset was known to every one and everybody visited it before he died. So Sammy White said, and Sammy was supposed to know what everybody did. If not the prime purpose of his being, that was at least the main object of his life. He had known Mauwusset, he said, in its simple days, when a summer boarder was regarded as a profitable curiosity. Now Mauwusseters fleeced and amused delegations from Kansas City and points farther West. One who wanted a glimpse of its pristine peculiarities should go at once, or as early as possible.

It was after dinner when Sammy thus emphasized Strong's duty to self, if not to society. In the enthusiasm of recollection, and what was recently consumed, he even sent for a time-table and pointed out which, in his opinion, was the best train. As to letters, he knew everybody worth knowing, and they would welcome Strong, as his particular friend. Strong was not Sammy's "particular friend," but there was no need of saying so. Moreover, why not go to Mauwusset? He had heard it praised by men that were sober and far more intelligent than Sammy at his best. It was a rather famous island, off the Atlantic coast and far enough from land to escape the recurring inundation of week-enders. It had a

museum, a windmill, a cool climate, moors, — so the tinted steamship circular said, — and lanes more crooked than the streets of Boston. If one required more, there were whalebones deposited somewhere on the beach and skippers dry as salt New England cod. It was at least different from the ordinary summer resort composed of a handful of the rich entirely surrounded by persons going bankrupt in trying to seem wealthy. Its putative attractions outweighed disinclination to test the unknown.

The next day he sailed. If Mauwusset proved amusing, he would stay. If it bored, there was an invitation from Narragansett. The people who gave it were a good sort, but the place was associated with Eleanor. It was well to let sleeping memories alone. Of late he had pondered his proficiency in forgetfulness. While it was nothing to be proud of, it did ease the strain of life. One's energies were conserved by concentration on the present. If the dead past buried its dead, probably the future would be equally obliging. According to rule of moral and logic, such reasoning was narrow and selfish, and foolish to boot. Still, some men did prosper with the doctrines of *laissez-faire* and "Take what comes." He might be equally lucky. He reflected that he must have changed considerably to entertain such theories.

Where was the boy who had yearned for power that he might benefit humanity? And where was the youth with his vision of a woman of transfiguring sweetness, the unknown who would unlock the sub-

tlest mystery of life? He saw them as figures hesitant, and far back in the pathway of life. And yet they were not aliens. While a sunset thrilled him, and a stray child tugged at his heart, he was still within hail of tender realities. But he had gone with the tide, and taken pot luck with chance companions of the voyage.

A pretty way to begin a vacation with mooning in the morning. There was little to interest one in the sparsely populated deck, and he was thrown back upon himself by the monotony of the sunny sea. The only person obviously out of the ordinary was an actress with "come-hither" eyes. He knew she was an actress by the indefinable something that seems to parade a line of footlights before daughters of the stage. She was evidently bored, too, but he did not scrape acquaintance. Coarse manners and conspicuous dress were more repugnant than loose morals. For they were forced to the front in casual acquaintance, while standards of conduct were reserved for those with a draft on the treasury of character.

At East Boxford the New England delegation came aboard, and he was entertained awhile by the true-born Yankee in dead earnest after pleasure. With their port of destination several hours ahead, they yet had the air of men and women about to dash madly for a train. Confined to men alone, this characteristic might indicate inability to relax from the strain of business and professional duties not far

behind. But their wives and daughters were equally watchful, as they sat erect, instinctively spurning the backs of their chairs. Small wonder that, as a people, they did not vitalize any art. For they carefully kept soul and sensibility apart from life, that grimly serious business. Strong felt he knew them, for he himself was of their stock, with sufficient detachment for perspective. It seemed to him that they did a great deal of good in the world without adding much to its pleasure.

The afternoon was near its close, and the steamer trudged on steadily. "Trudged" seemed a fitting word for a stout boat that ploughed the water like a boy sturdily footing it through the snow. The volume of traffic was far from impressive. A fleet of porpoise once flashed under the bow. Otherwise, there was nothing more exciting than a string of coasters, — low, dingy craft with their simple washing flapping aloft, a string in convoy of a puffing, important tug.

As if slowly but steadily drawn by an invisible hand, the sun dropped to the horizon line, where it hung smoky red. Then it sank, its slow dwindling marked by a narrowing lane of crimson. The quieting waters briefly turned to amethyst, and a green-gray veil came in attendance on the first star. Far ahead a single light twinkled, and an elderly man sitting beside Strong in the bow snapped his watch with satisfaction. "Be in on time to-night," he said, addressing the universe.

The light held its promise and presently others kept it company. Without appearance of regularity, they seemed to shine in a long line, like brilliants plastered on the handle of a dipper indicated by larger and brighter lights in a cluster. A tower beacon turned steadily, as if revolving in an English waltz. There was a general stir after bags, umbrellas, golf sticks, tennis rackets, boxes, umbrella straps, the impedimenta of a holiday crowd.

Almost grazing a point marked by a squatty lighthouse, the steamer celebrated its achievement with a hoarse hoot. Mauwusset was just ahead. Strong picked out the wharf, with a jumble of indistinct roofs and a few spires lined against the evening sky. As the steamer ponderously sidled up to the wharf it seemed that Mauwusset had assembled *en masse* to greet her. A long shore walk black and white with expectant summer folk, a maze of livery vehicles, and the double line of urgent porters suggested Atlantic City, or some other ant hill by the sea, rather than a quaint island, the home of preserved mariners.

He put his trust in the Seaside House. Its name appeared to be a misnomer. It was up from the shore, on a square agitant with persons whose cigars and cigarettes, and soprano giggles, flanked by heavier "ha, ha's," gave character to the darkness. He felt that unseen eyes inspected the latest consignment of arrivals. He had no curiosity to return. Sammy had recommended the Seaside, and Sammy

had pressed upon him letters of introduction warranted to make life in Mauwusset a blissful swoon. Even allowing for the fact that Sammy was exhilarated when he prophesied, and not brilliant at best, there was probably some percentage of fact to bank on in what he said.

He was not much disturbed on finding himself at table with a party of teachers. To be sure, teachers were apt to be torturingly serious or terribly gay. But either might be escaped with the aid of a compassionate head waiter. So he ate in peace. The food was good, and so was the room with a southwest exposure the clerk harped upon. But a summer hotel chamber is a place to sleep in, and of no other use. He wandered forth to smoke and get the feeling of the place.

A step from the sidewalk switched him to thoughts of another place and far-off days. The paving was of asphalt. "Granolithic" they used to call it in Lyme. He remembered how it cracked and softened, growing squashy in summer and yielding a faint smell of tar on hot days. He never thought of Lyme when he could help it, for it was indelibly associated with loneliness that was misery, with questionings of a young soul afraid. He was ashamed when he remembered how many years had elapsed since last he saw it. He had often half-intended to go, for his mother was there. Now she was dead. He could visualize the place where she was buried, the little cemetery at the edge of the pines between the river

that ran softly in summer and roared, briefly swollen, in the early spring.

His mother had always understood him sufficiently to sympathize with what seemed affectation or vagary to other members of the family. He regretted he had not known her better. He remembered her as placid and almost invariably sweet. But there was a daguerreotype sent him as a keepsake when she died. It was the likeness of a young woman, probably in her twenties. While the face was not one of remarkable charm, it conveyed a suggestion of eagerness to read in the book of life. What erased that look, and obliterated ardent interest? Had she suffered the self-effacement of so many women who bury their soul, tenderly, for it is their first-born, in the grave of commonplace existence?

Another problem it was too late to solve. He returned to immediate surroundings. Mechanically he weaved his way on sidewalks thronged with chattering pedestrians who ventured freely in the street. There were no trolley cars or motors to menace, only private carriages and public carryalls drawn by horses that jogged with a steady "kloop-kloop," like a drumming of wings. Gas-lights spurted in many little shops and the crowd flowed in and out. Seemingly, nobody wanted anything in particular, but everybody was in receptive mood. So a crowd goes from aprons to home-made candy at a church fair.

Standing on a table, a man who looked like a justice of the peace auctioned off rush-seated chairs, battered candlesticks, and andirons with the rust of years. Down Main Street, lined with elms that almost touched finger tips in friendly leaning, a band played cheerfully. In that vicinity congregated Portuguese *bravas*, — dark, handsome people, lounging like statues. Still the crowd walked and talked, and men smoked, and the women slowed their steps before shop windows.

The difference between this throng and a collection of chattering humans at an ordinary seaside place seemed to Strong like the difference between plain water and a seltzer. He felt as if he had blundered into a family reunion. Seemingly it was a family of excellent habits. The last blare of the band was accepted as a curfew signal. By ten o'clock there were few abroad. An hour later the town slept. The night was soft and dark, with a drug in the light wind. When he sought his hotel a bellboy with eyes glued to some piece of toothsome fiction was the only person visible.

To guests of the Seaside "early to bed" evidently meant "early to rise." By nine o'clock the breakfast room was nearly empty, and piazzas were fringed with the middle-aged obese. Strong could not regard his escape from educators of youth as wholly successful. He found himself seated with an elderly gentleman who looked like Emerson and talked persistently about vegetarianism. Also, the

elderly gentleman's wife, who talked about her daughter and grandchildren, and the daughter, who talked about her children and husband. Marcus Aurelius became his bodyguard from that meal.

The morning disclosed Mauwusset an attractive place. Some learned geologist estimated that in two hundred years it would be gradually blown into the sea. But it seemed still substantial. Its streets were wide and pleasantly shaded, or quaintly curved passageways with odd little houses that almost roosted on the irregular brick walk. Handsome houses of Colonial design, and square, substantial structures, distinguished in the roof promenade from which the whaler's wife once sighted afar off her lord's return, stamped the show section. There were doorways to delight the artist, and behind high walls old-fashioned gardens bloomed. Mignonette and marigold, the poppy and fuschia, sunflowers and geraniums, flourished with appearance of careless profusion. And everywhere hydrangeas prospered in the moist air. It was like a breath from boyhood.

Mauwusset was cigar-like, with summer residences strewn along a low hill known as "The Cliff." A few houses on the shore, but it was mostly bare, as if man had considerably refrained from crowding the sea. The wharves were clustered, with small fishing-boats and pleasure craft of bijou dimensions furnishing an appearance of mild activity. What the great majority of Mauwusseters did for a living

was not evident. Presumably they lived on the summer boarder.

The place seemed given over to the young, the rather middle-aged, and the old. Children in bewildering abundance, the undergraduate and his boisterous girl, devoted young married pairs, and weary old couples. What was there for a youngish unattached man who did not care for mediocre strangers, loved nature only in moderation, and himself not at all? Sammy had undertaken to provide. Pointers accompanying his letters had been alcoholically exhaustive, but they did not stick in mind. A letter addressed to "Mrs. Rosalie Knight" Strong took first for the name's sake. It was night that would bother most, if he found no amusement.

Mrs. Rosalie Knight was not at home. She had not been for two years. He ascertained that fact from a man who watched his fruitless ringing with speculative interest, one leg over the gate. "She was one of my best customers," he added. "Thank you," said Strong, as he began an investigation of his pockets to find another open sesame from Sammy. The mourning merchant took another chew of tobacco and moved slowly on.

Evidently the second letter had been left behind. Anyway, it was hot and near noon. He sauntered back to the Seaside, where the piazza was dotted with men bridging their backs in semi-recumbent position and women who rocked and knitted unceasingly. In the sun parlor a "Lady Orchestra" wres-

tled with "The Palms," a stout young woman employing her cornet with explosive energy. Strong kept straight on to his room with the southwest exposure.

He had selected Mrs. Rosalie Knight with fanciful care. His second selection he made by grab-bag procedure. "William Simpkins, Esq.," came to hand. Near the time for tea and *tête-à-tête* he picked his way to the address given. Mr. Simpkins saw him, figuratively speaking. Literally, he lived behind smoked glasses and perceived little. He had a wife, an amiable lady who had bloomed in the days of Adelaide Nielson. They were very hospitable and exceedingly dull. With some difficulty Strong escaped, depressed. If the patient waiter is no loser, it may be so with the patient pursuer. But he distrusted the remaining letters Sammy had pressed upon him. He recalled that Sammy had said "Good-bye" to fifty, and for several years had spent certain hours of most days in the same club window. Probably he passed on illusions he had escaped having disturbed.

That evening Strong was weak. It happened through imprudence in lingering near one of the bridge tables dragged out when dinner was over. He smoked till Lady Nicotine turned bitter, and found no amusement in the winking stars. Then he was vaguely uncomfortable in hearing conversation with the mute on from so many corners. He retired, however, with no intention of playing bridge. It was too trying to the disposition, since

most persons played badly and everybody was convinced he himself played well. As to ladies, at the bridge table they heaped upon strange men the blanket burden of responsibility reserved for husbands at home.

Still, he played with strangers. It was a mixed foursome from which a man withdrew at the end of a rubber, with a picked-up apology and an air of haste. The surviving male grasped Strong before he could escape. He was a hearty man, whose look was an advertisement. He had the appearance of a professional back-slayer.

"Sit in, stranger," he said, with an expansive gesture indicating the vacant seat.

"I ought to write some letters —" Strong began evasively.

"You Easterners," boomed the stout man, "are so darned stiff."

"You Westerners —" began Strong mentally, but he did not speak aloud. For he experienced the conventional person's occasional inclination to do an unconventional thing.

"If the ladies —?" he said with a bow.

"Oh, thank you," they chorused.

"My name's Wilkins," announced the stout man as he took the vacant chair. "My wife," with a wave toward one who looked as if she had been sharpened by strong winds, "and Miss Pratt." Miss Pratt was stout and light, with a look of expectancy in her pale blue eyes.

"My name is Strong," he said with equal brevity.

"Pleased to meet you," came from three throats.

The cut gave him Mrs. Wilkins for his partner. The way her mouth tightened as she picked up her cards produced in him the feeling of one weighed in advance and found wanting. But he experienced no reproach or disaster. Luck was with him too strongly to admit of an acid test. Miss Pratt played badly. A habit of hovering over her cards reminded him of a fluttering bird disturbed on its nest. Mr. Wilkins held his peace, at times with difficulty, till a rubber was lost by her triumphant parade of trumps that left them exposed to a long suit.

"I'm so sorry I did n't save a reëntry," she said while he gloomily figured the score.

Then Mr. Wilkins scored heavily. "A fool and his trumps are soon parted," he observed with a bitter air.

"His" did not disguise the shot, at which Miss Pratt blinked her distress. If she insisted upon weeping, Strong was in more danger than Wilkins, being nearer.

"If you will excuse me, I will attend to my letters now," he said. "Thank you so much," and made his escape.

It was not a promising beginning. Mauwusset must do better, or he would be off to Narragansett, memories or no memories. With rambling reflection

upon the general uselessness of vacations, he fell asleep.

The next morning he tried nature. Sammy's friends had died or grown *passé*, but the island must be about the same. "Walk to Taugut," Sammy had said. "You get the moors on the way." He got the moors promised, and it seemed to him that he met billions of black flies that caused him to think kindly of the Jersey mosquito.

Midday dinner inflicted upon patrons of summer hotels did not greatly solace, though the cooking was excellent and his appetite good. One could not eat and sleep all the time. He examined a time-table posted in the hotel office, and so learned of a tennis tournament announced below it. The championship final in singles for all Mauwusset was to be played at the Casino that afternoon. He had a card entitling him to privileges of the Casino, except voting for officers and paying dues, and helping to decide such momentous questions as, "Shall members' wives have a right to invite guests?" and, "Is it wise to serve pop beer, or other intoxicants on the premises?"

"Our guests always receive this courtesy," the clerk had remarked with an oleaginous smile. A Mauwusset tournament was not likely to show anything reminiscent of Newport or a Davis Cup match. Still, it would be difficult for tennis players to bore him as badly as he could bore himself. And what was left of Sammy's "Who's Who," he feared

to use. The tournament was Hobson's choice, but he smoked another cigar and walked as slowly as possible to reduce the aggregate of weariness, in case play proved dull.

In its general social complexion Mauwusset was an unusual place, but all tennis crowds are the same. He knew what it would be like, men in serge and flannels and the women in white, lining the sides and banking the ends of the court, leaning far forward with a hum of polite comment; no applause save a ripple of hand-clapping when some one served an ace or leaped into the air for a brilliant kill. And the players would be strenuously polite to each other, and after it was all over the assembled enthusiasts would drink tea.

He found a comfortable seat, and the playing was almost good enough to enable him to ignore jocosely sentimental conversation of a few near-by freshmen and bouncing girls of eighteen. It was about a hop they had attended the night before, and the "crush" Madge had on Harry, and why Lillian would n't dance the one-step with Fred, and the reasons Sam had for preferring Maude to Alice. It was all very silly.

He felt properly scornful, but a bit sad, too. In a sense, he envied these featherbrains. They had something precious he had never possessed. How had he missed it, the joyous foolishness of youth?

The sun seemed intolerably hot, and the chatter of the crowd was like the gabbling of parrots. On

sudden impulse he rose and started for the Casino. He had no special purpose in view, only instinctive desire to get away. Proceeding somewhat blindly, he was seized by the arm. He raised his eyes to Damerel's ruddy countenance.

"Hello," that worthy remarked with a cheerful grin. "What are you doing here?"

"Being bored." Strong was too depressed to lie. "How do you happen here?" he added, making the customary response.

"Came to get away from what you've got." For Damerel, whose hobbies were cards, polo, and ladies of certain reputation, this was a brilliant speech. Strong felt himself honored in being the recipient. "Tired of the bungalow," Damerel continued, tendering his cigarettes. "Tired of Newport. Tired of going across the little pond. Trying the simple life for a change."

"How does it go?" Strong inquired. He associated Damerel with the "simple life" as one would associate a bird of paradise with scratching for worms in a farmyard.

"Fine, fine," said Damerel, with a slap. "Better come up to-night, and get cheered up. Where you staying?"

"At the Seaside."

The announcement had more than anticipated effect. Damerel regarded him with the pity he would have bestowed upon a hound with a torn ear, or a pony with a stone in its hoof.

"Not a damned thing to drink," he observed solemnly. "Stayed there myself one day. No wonder you look peckish. Come on."

"What's up?" asked Strong. He had to inquire in transit, for Damerel had him by the elbow, and Damerel's physical vigor was even more pronounced than the weakness of his head.

"Going to present you to the ladies. Right over there." He waved his disengaged arm.

"But I don't want to intrude," began Strong.

"Can't intrude. Must n't interfere with my Christian duty."

There was something comic in a conception of Christian duty that embraced rounds of cocktails, highballs galore, bridge till cockcrow, and any side line of amusement that came to mind. And there was something amusing in the sight of Damerel with a fixed idea. Strong protested no more.

Damerel's party were seated on a drag. As they approached, one figure detached itself, so that Strong had no definite impression of the others. It was Mrs. Ormsby. The feet last seen in a Canadian brook were smartly shod now and saucily crossed. With his habit of inventory, he noted that she wore a dress of light purple stuff, with a lace hat that was very becoming. At least she dressed with better taste than the rest of the party. She met his bow with a quizzical smile. Her eyes challenged more than her voice. "My John the Baptist again," she said with a mock sigh.

In defense against this unexpected attack his eyes chanced upon her overskirt of net. "But you," he said, touching it with a finger, "have only one veil."

"That will be sufficient," she lazily said. He had wondered at possibilities of her black eyes with their banked fires. There was momentary illumination as she spoke.

There was no more between them, for Damerel, still full of enthusiasm for his mission, was intent upon presenting Strong to the others in turn. "Has n't had a drink since he came," he wound up impressively. "You poor dear!" chorused the women. One of the two other men said, "The devil!" A man who somehow suggested a fireman's extension ladder struck an attitude, and began to recite, —

"Drink, for you know not when or where—"

His name was Pennington, and his mind was an intellectual ragbag. He spoke "Hog Latin" and *table d'hôte* French with quenchless vivacity, with an astonishing medley of Longfellow, Byron, Shakespeare, Tom Moore, poets in general and nobody in particular. He was popular with ladies of a light-thinking set. They said he had "such go." The second man, Mortimer, Strong knew by reputation. He was an expert with the camera and an experienced husband: two divorces before the age of thirty-five. One of the women was an actress, a mistress of comedy and of thrift. Her commercialism was excused for the sake of her talent. There

was Mrs. Lynne, who seemed happy with a banker husband and a possible correspondent, and Damerel's sister, Mrs. Barker, who had married a Knickerbocker and found sanctity unendurable.

Strong smiled inwardly as he hunted a shred of stability in Damerel's assemblage for the "simple life." That worthy was still intent upon rescue. "Go aboard," he said. "First call for dinner."

"But my clothes are at the hotel," Strong objected.

"We'll call for them. Take you right along." Damerel's ardor was remarkable.

They bowled along, with a rattling of harness that did not drown Pennington's falsetto singing.

"Rescue the perishing —"

he warbled.

Their arrival at the Seaside was to guests collected for tea the equivalent of a cocktail. Strong felt the excitement as he ran up the steps, and knew himself a marked man. No doubt Damerel had acquired reputation. He emerged with his dinner clothes. Damerel had been quite clamorous for his trunk, but he stood out against becoming a house guest. There was prudence in that.

The house at which they pulled up with a flourish was the most pretentious on "The Cliff." Strong had marked it from the shore road, dubbing it "The House of a Hundred Steps." It seemed a natural enough habitation for Damerel, who always sought

something in keeping with the size of the fortune his father had made in Pittsburg steel. He liked to entertain somebody, anybody that was jolly. Strong meditated upon the Fates that gave so empty-headed a fellow thorough satisfaction in life, as he dressed in a room considerably better than his southwest exposure at the Seaside. A discreet knock, and "Come in" brought a servant with two cocktails on a tray.

"Compliments of Mr. Damerel, sir," he said.

"My thanks to him. Put them down."

Strong went on dressing. He drank one cocktail and spilled the other in the fireplace, a little regretfully, for the one he had was very good. But two at a time was going too fast. What he remembered of Damerel's Canadian entertainment forbade thought of pain through thirst. On reaching the drawing-room, it seemed probable that his host had been less partial than he assumed. Men and women alike exhibited brightness of eye, a slight heightened color, and amiable looseness of tongue suggesting they had quaffed the waters of Lethe.

For no reason he could define he sought Mrs. Ormsby. Again she delighted the eye, though he was rasped a bit by rakish suggestion. "The queen of the *demi-monde*," he said to himself. She wore black unrelieved save by a diamond heart flashing its challenge at her bosom.

"Well," she said, opening fire promptly, "what is the text to-night?"

"What is the reason for your attitude toward me?" he demanded bluntly.

"What is the reason for any woman's attitude toward any man?" She laughed at the idea.

"You asked me a similar question once," he reminded her.

"And did I get any satisfaction?"

She blew a ring of smoke with careful precision, and regarded him with mocking eyes. He was in danger of striking his flag when Damerel came to the rescue with his cheerful "Line up." He took her in to dinner, and for several courses they did no more than join in the general and aimless verbal fusillade. Then talk grew quieter, more restricted and confidential. Damerel's champagne was very good.

Strong learned that Mrs. Ormsby, like himself, was only a "dinner guest."

"Yes, you heard right."

"Did I look surprised?" he asked.

"More than that. You looked shocked. Why should n't I have a house here?"

"No reason at all. There are no restrictions I know of on sales of real estate."

He was nettled by her obvious amusement.

"What a rude remark," she said, sipping her champagne. "But I don't mind. Somehow, I don't mind at all."

"It's fortunate we are even." He emptied his own glass with a gulp.

"Still, you would like to know how I happen to be a regular resident of this proper place."

"I would n't expect you to select it for a home."

Fencing was no use. He had fallen back on truth. It is man's last refuge with woman, and woman's great strategy with man.

"And I would n't expect it of myself. But you see I inherited it. I'm somewhat responsible for Damerel, and Damerel's friends, and the greatest temptation Mauwusset ever had."

"What are you two so chummy about?" called the irrepressible Pennington. "Is another innocent added to the Worshipers of Virginia?"

"As cheerful as usual, Percy," Mrs. Ormsby responded, "and fully as intelligent. I'm telling Mr. Strong my life story."

"We all know that," he rejoined with a giggle. "Comrades, a bumper to the three-decker novel."

The toast went with barks of approval, and, bottle in hand, the impassive butler again visited the empty glass. As conversation eddied away, Mrs. Ormsby tapped her plate meditatively.

"Would you really like to hear it?" she asked.

"You need n't keep your promise to Pennington," Strong said.

"I need n't keep my promise to anybody. You don't know how good that is. I don't suppose you were ever tied to anybody that wearied you night and day."

The random thrust sent him into his shell.

"I suppose," he said, "that happens to all the married."

"Cynicism is n't becoming to you," she remarked, critically examining the tip of her cigarette. "You're not that kind."

"Am I safely classified?" he inquired.

"Oh, yes. You're 'The Man Who Won't Ask.' And since you won't ask, I insist upon telling you about myself."

"Very well," he said resignedly. "I'm here to listen."

"Even that won't stop me. To begin with the beginning, I was born here. My father was a clergyman. Are you interested yet?"

"Agape with interest. Please go on."

"I played my ace first. My father was a clergyman, and my mother was an opera singer. I suppose she accounts for me. One can't, as they say 'take after' both parents. She was an Italian, and my father met her while he was being 'finished' in Europe. Poor Dad. He could n't give up either her or the Church. So he became a poor minister and a tolerable husband. But as a father he was perfect. We were always chums. Were you very close to your father?"

"He tolerated me in the house." Strong pulled hard on his cigar. She had a habit of asking unpleasant questions.

"Then it was your mother?" she pursued.

"It was neither," he said, driven to frankness.

"That accounts for you, in a way."

He had again the feeling a gnat might have under a microscope, and struck out at random to change her line of thought.

"You said your mother was an Italian?"

"Yes. Would you have guessed it?"

"I might have," he said, giving her the benefit of full scrutiny. She was undeniably handsome in a Latin style, and her eyes met his without evasion. They gratified his curiosity at least. The resemblance he had noted on first sight came back to mind.

"It's queer," he continued, "but you remind me of an old portrait."

"Is it in the Louvre?" She spoke calmly, but her eyes brightened to dagger points.

"Yes," he assented. "How did you know?"

"I've been told. Do you know the history of the painting?"

"Guide's patter, that's all. She was one of the Medici family, I remember, and Leonardo painted her."

"Was that all he told you?" She turned, her elbow on the table, and he fell back defensively. It was as if she were pulling off the covers of his mind.

"That's all," he rejoined evasively. "There was something about an intrigue, I believe."

"The guide was more communicative the day I went through." She relaxed her scrutiny to light a

cigarette. The index finger of her right hand showed a brownish spot. "The lady was killed by her husband," she went on, "and he also killed her lover, who was an Englishman. He was an architect, they say, who had a commission from the Medici."

"Now my profession is involved," he said with lightness assumed.

She did not take the cue. All about them banal quips were falling like rain. They seemed isolated, marooned. She sat looking at her champagne, seeing something in its sparkling life.

"Do you remember the Ponte Vecchio?" she asked.

"All covered with little shops except near the middle." He fell in with her mood.

"And the view there — Brunelleschi's dome, with the shaft of pearl beside it."

She paused contemplatively, and he expanded her vision. "With the red tiles and tawny towers against the long olive slope climbing to Fiesole."

The wall of their seclusion fell with the crash of Damerel's voice.

"Come, moonstruck ones," he called. "Got to have you for a game of bridge."

The others had already risen, and were moving noisily toward the door. For the rest of the evening his conversation with Mrs. Ormsby was restricted to talk at the bridge table. And with Damerel's guests talk at bridge was comparative silence. They lavished upon play such intellect as they possessed,

and ended much earlier than was their habit. Some slumbrous influence in Mauwusset made midnight seem later than daybreak in town.

"Send you home in the carriage," said Damerel as Strong prepared to go. "Ordered it for Virginia, and it can just as well take you both."

"Thanks, but I'd like the walk to freshen me."

They all stood laughing and talking at the open door, while the carriage waited for Mrs. Ormsby at the steps. As she extended her hand to Pennington he kissed it with pretended devotion.

"I would kiss your cheek, fair one. But," striking an attitude for Strong's benefit, "I fear to teach the innocent a trick."

"Hopeless child," she said, with a grimace to Strong. "Is n't he?"

He answered her question with one of his own: —

"Don't you think somebody should give the customary salute?"

It was over in a moment, and she was on her way to the steps amid boisterous salutes. She vanished in the dark with a wave of her hand. Strong, too, at once departed, to the disgust of Pennington, who proclaimed desire to decorate him with the order of Virginia.

Mauwusset was abed as he proceeded slowly, busy with thought of what had turned an island of featureless activity into at least a speculatively interesting place. Companionship, though it was not the society he preferred, refreshed him like a cool plunge.

He had a relish for nature, and such human interests as Mauwusset possessed, not felt before.

On a corner commanding a harbor view he paused, possessed by the spirit of the night. Sliding through dark and scattered clouds, the moon maintained subdued radiance occasionally turned to silver in the placid harbor waters. Far to the right, and across the vaguely spacious moors, a great light signaled to coastwise craft and to lunging steamships that bore passengers westward bound. Nearer, two smaller beacons marked the tips of a bow, with little scattered lights of fishermen's cottages indenting the crescent shore. It was warm and still, with the almost imperceptible bouquet of many blended gardens in the air.

Solitude, and night, and the moon. The heart was tuned to romance or turned to melancholy. Strong felt the latter's approach and turned its flank. Mrs. Ormsby was a somewhat interesting proposition. What did she mean by the queer turn of her talk about the portrait of the luckless Medici in the Louvre? Did she consider herself a reincarnation? And what did she mean in her questions about the Ponte Vecchio, and the view from it? He was rather sorry he had played up to her mood. For he had never been in Florence, and he had no vision of red tiles, and tawny towers, and long olives slopes, save as they were presented to him in a Florentine tale quite saturated with scenery which he had read that very day.

The Stronges were English stemming from Surrey stock, but there was no tradition of an ancestor romantically slaughtered. Personally he took no stock in the theory that the dead positively live again through transferal of personality. After all, it was rather absurd to suppose that Mrs. Ormsby had a notion that she was some sixteenth-century woman and he a sixteenth-century man. One must not attach much importance to random remarks uttered under the spurious inspiration of shaded lights and wine. Only he would keep away from the subject hereafter. It would be awkward to confess that all he knew of Florence came from magazines and books.

There was a good deal in intuition. Sometimes he thought there was too much. An obtuse male might make a woman angry, but he never got into trouble through understanding what a woman could n't understand herself. The poet was a sound philosopher when he spoke of being cruel to be kind. One could not lend himself like a novel. Either the book got badly damaged, or the borrower could not bear the thought of return. As to being a circulating library of love, that was only possible to a Benvenuto Cellini or a George Sand.

The Seaside was a silent pile as he ascended its steps and shut off reflection with a final personal twist. Mauwusset seemed likely to prove tolerable through the Damerel crowd. But he must avoid getting too thick with them. As to Mrs. Ormsby — well,

she had n't even asked him to call. He slept without difficulty.

Having a place to go to, next day, he was quite resigned to going nowhere. The tired business man who golfed by prescription, and his stout wife who walked for like reason; the elderly dyspeptic to whom breakfast was a battlefield, and greedy boys who turned it into a rout; the twittering woman and the self-important man, — summer hotel types familiar as Gibson drawings presented their humorous rather than their trying aspects. He smoked two cigars in the sun parlor, and did not flinch while the Lady Orchestra tooted and scraped its way through "Love's Dream after the Ball."

He was somewhat astonished to find the morning advanced to ten o'clock. By that time Damerel and his friends were riding. He had been invited to join them the night before.

"Got a horse for you, and a drink for you any time," Damerel had said with the slap that betokened genuine amiability. "Use the house like your own."

He did not care to follow the night's entertainment with a morning arrival; but the suggestion of a canter in a place untroubled by motors was an attractive one. A card in his room that told him how to attach and use a knotted rope in case of fire, and how many rings for ice water, and what would be the extra charge for meals served in rooms, besides mentioned an "excellent livery in connection with

this house." He ordered a horse, and when it arrived he was glad he had wasted no breath in specifications that probably would not be observed. Not that the horse was a bad one. It was astonishingly good in style and steam. It even had the true saddle horse's personal interest in an occasion.

It was a bright morning, and the air livelier than usual, as he rode down to Captain's Row, where sunlight through foliage made patterns on the pavement; by the Soldiers' Monument no self-respecting New England community can do without; and by the old windmill that stood out against the sky. It was tied now, and the Commons it overlooked no longer furnished free pasturage for anybody's cow; but Mauwusseters took pride in the fact that both might still be used.

The moors were visible, heather-clad and billowing into a horizon that gave no hint of the Atlantic washing a shore not far beyond. A narrow carriage road wriggled across them, but it was evident that traffic followed the traveler's will. Occasional wheel-tracks to right or left showed where some driver had struck out. Strong followed suit, and found the going good. By the cant of its ears, light tossing of its head, and a general sensation of exuberant energy under him, he felt his horse's frolic mood. On a touch of his heel they were off in an orgy of flight. When hoofs no longer spurned the elastic earth he pulled up with the muffled roll of water in his ears. Not far ahead a slight elevation dovetailed with the

sky. When he came to its summit he overlooked the sea. A blue-green in the sunlight, it came rolling lazily, and there was nothing but what its undulant expanses cradled between him and Portugal. Scudding under shortened sail, a fisherman supplied the human note. The tremendous vigor and cleanliness of the scene filled him with refreshment. He turned his horse and cantered toward the town. A pleasant reverie wrapped him in undefined consciousness of well-being.

The habit of midday dinner did not fret him as, bathed and pleasantly relaxed, he looked in the box consecrated to his room and the mail. There was a newspaper, a business letter, the florid circular of a wine merchant, and a note addressed in a sharply angular hand. It was vigorous yet feminine, and it was strange. Because time was a drug and he was pleasantly curious, he held the note to his nostrils. No perfume betrayed its authorship. Still unenlightened, he broke the seal. It was very brief and momentarily perplexing. No date, no crest, no monogram. Just a few lines vigorously written in the middle of the page: —

DEAR MR. STRONG: —

When can you come to see me?

V.

Who was "V," and why should he go to see her? The first part of the question memory presently

answered. Damerel had called Mrs. Ormsby "Virginia." It must be she, since there was no other possibility. But why did she extend in writing an invitation she might have given in person? And why haste about it, anyway? As he recalled it, most of their conversation had been in pointed disagreement. Some persons enjoyed quarreling with friends, but they did not hunt differences with comparative strangers. On the whole, it was a puzzling note, and Mrs. Ormsby was a contradictory person. With that conclusion he addressed the immediate and pressing problem of consommé or thick soup, mackerel or cod, roast beef or roast lamb, and so on.

That afternoon he went sailing in the boat chartered by Damerel principally, it appeared, because its ice box was large. Sailing was slow with a puffy breeze, but the flow of spirits was impressive. Besides Damerel himself, there was Pennington, looking somewhat like a flannel-clad angleworm; Mortimer; and Whiting, a Boston millionaire with much reputation on the polo field. Mrs. Lynne and the footlights queen were the only women, and one might have tossed a coin to decide which was more artificial. Strong was hardly aboard when Pennington demanded, "Where's Mrs. Ormsby?"

"How do I know?" he answered, a little nettled. Pennington cackled delightedly. "Listen," he said, "to the latest favorite."

Jollity that passes muster with ample elbow-room is vexatious in cramped quarters. Strong declined

an invitation for dinner. He wanted to rest his ears. Bearing somewhat reluctantly a bottle presented by his solicitous host, he went his way to the Seaside. There it was decorously dull, with most of the room not preëmpted by bridge players given over to a fancy-work exhibit and a lecture by a Zulu chief whom civilization so denatured that he became a Sunday-school superintendent. Debating whether he had better bear one of the ills at hand, or flee to others that he knew not of, he chanced to remember Mrs. Ormsby's invitation.

She was unlikely to be in. If not, with a card left his duty would be done. He would not telephone to ask if she were at home, for he wanted a walk, anything to escape from an atmosphere of heavily domestic jocosity that inspired in him unreasonable but almost irresistible desire to do something outrageous. There was no difficulty in locating Mrs. Ormsby's house. "The third beyond Bostock's Inn," the clerk told him. "Go straight along the Cliff."

It looked rather picturesque by moonlight as he paused at the gate. In the sizable garden divided by a flagged walk geranium beds showed dully red, and he had an impression that roses rioting over eaves close to the ground were red, too. The house was still and dark as he perfunctorily lifted an old brass knocker. He did not follow its summons attentively. The next thing was to leave a card. He sought lodgment for it as the door opened, disclosing

a maid with a lamp and a hall indefinite as to detail.

"Mrs. Ormsby is n't in?" he said, as if to confirm his impression.

"Yes, sir," responded the maid, taking the card from his outstretched hand. "Step this way, please."

By lamplight the room seemed pleasant in an old-fashioned, comfortable way. Without disclosing their titles, books lining one wall conveyed a suggestion of mellow age. He noted a bust of Emerson, a spindle-legged cabinet, a few landscapes and portraits framed in a generation enamored of heavy piecrust and thick mouldings, and a square piano in a corner. A bird-cage hung by an open window, and he crossed the room to see what it contained. Only a canary roused by his approach to a tiny piping that ended when hardly begun.

"Are you scraping acquaintance with Beppo?" said Mrs. Ormsby behind him.

"I take it Beppo is a bird," he remarked, turning to bow. He knew it was a banal remark, but Mrs. Ormsby did not seem to think so.

"Yes," she said. "Don't you remember the canary in the portrait?"

He shied at suggestion of the Louvre, and a possibility of ancestral memoirs based on magazine fiction. That turn must be avoided.

"I'm rather outrageously quick in following up your invitation. In fact, I hardly expected to find you at home."

She smiled at the implied suggestion. "You are not apologizing for a bad guess?" she queried.

"Of course not," he said hastily.

"Then, please sit down. I rather expected you. So you see I'm a better guesser than you are."

"But once you guessed wrong." He hardly dared to specify.

"We might go on this way forever. But would it be any use?" She regarded him now with frank amusement. "Don't you think your shattered nerves require a drink? Yes, of course you do. What man does n't at any time, on any excuse? Scotch, rye, plebeian beer, — what's your choice?"

"It sounds like a bar."

"It is a bar, in the cabinet that used to hold father's sermons. Pennington suggested it after Katie had come for the third time to satisfy his preposterous thirst. Since then I've been barmaid. Will I do?"

"You make me indifferent to what I drink."

She curtsied after the old-fashioned manner. "From Pennington, if he could think of it, that would mean nothing. From you, it means nothing. So I put the question again. What shall it be?"

"Scotch, then. May I smoke?"

"A natural question, but unnatural behavior. You are actually waiting for an answer."

"That is n't queer, is it? Why should I take 'Yes' for granted?"

"Oh, most men take what they want for granted."

She was measuring the whiskey in a tall glass with a practiced eye.

"Don't you know it's unfeminine to be cynical?"

"I'm not cynical, only indulgent."

Their conversation approached the familiar basis of affirmation and denial, cut and thrust. Such verbal exercise was too measured, like the deadly celebrated "Chopsticks Waltz." With this reflection in mind, he received his glass, noting she kept its companion for herself. Whiskey and soda was not an orthodox beverage for women, but probably it was less harmful than cocktails they drank as their mothers took tea.

"Your good health," he said, rising in salute.

"You solemn men make little things so ritualistic. That was like a prayer. Are you religious?"

"Are you inquisitive?"

There was no resentment, only insolent amusement in her eyes. What he thought of was her charm of pose. She was dressed simply in white, yet with simplicity that did not argue economy. He had some notion of the value of lace that followed the sweep of graceful lines from shoulder to hip, as she reclined in a lounging chair of green, with dull green draperies for a background. He noted the slender roundness of her arms, and how beautifully turned was the wrist of the hand in which she held her cigarette. In the soft light a certain hardness in hollows of the nostrils and lips was unseen and forgotten in enjoyment of clean contours.

His inspection unconsciously intent she endured with composure. "What are you thinking about?" she asked, not coquettishly but casually, as one asks another's opinion of the weather.

"That you are very effective," he replied bluntly.

"A grudging compliment. But I suppose I should be grateful. Why is it so hard for you to be pleasant to me?"

"What do you care whether I am pleasant or not?"

"You can't be asking for information. Women always care about neglect more than they care about appreciation. It's only that, I suppose, that makes me ask, 'What can I do to please you?'"

"I don't know," he said candidly.

She flipped the ash from her cigarette impatiently.

"You'll at least admit I can mix a drink acceptably? Which reminds me that you need one now. No protest, please. You must be comfortable, or you'll be cross. But you never are comfortable with me, are you?"

"Why not answer for yourself. William Gillette always does."

"But that's in a play."

"Are n't you acting?"

He was beginning to feel the exhilaration of combat. What Mrs. Ormsby meant by her note no longer constituted a delicate question. But she herself was a problem to be solved. He felt no concern

over the situation. The cheer of alcohol was a pleasant fire in his veins.

Mrs. Ormsby did not resent his skepticism. Neither did she seem grieved.

"It takes two to make a serious discussion," she observed judicially.

"I'm not serious," he volunteered.

"Of course I never am." She laughed as if jesting with herself, and fingered carelessly a rose at her belt.

"Do you like flowers?" she asked.

"As I like women. I don't understand them."

Under impatient pressure a thorn of the rose pricked her finger, and a drop of blood stood on its smooth whiteness. "A fair match," she said, critically comparing blood and blossom. "Come into the garden. I like it best by moonlight. There's nothing to prevent imagining each blossom at its best."

"Will you be warm enough?" he asked as he rose to follow her.

"Oh, yes," carelessly. "Please put out the light. The heat of a lamp is too much in warm weather."

The garden to which she led him was not visible from the street. It was a rear garden of that comfortable size between spaciousness and restriction that imposes a feeling of being shut in. A high fence kept out the world of prying eyes, and against it a thick dark hedge stood, a softer barrier of nature. There must have been lilacs without, for their per-

fume was heavy in the air, and a great elm that tempered the sun's rays by day softened the clear brightness of the moon. All about them simple flowers were asleep with the murmur of a quiet tide in their ears. Some freak of memory detached Strong for a moment. It was the Capulet's moon-drenched garden that he saw, and from her balcony adorable Marlowe answered Romeo's plea with the passionate candor of Juliet, —

"I gave thee mine before thou didst request it;
And yet I would it were to give again."

From the hotel near by came a strain of dance music, and Mrs. Ormsby completed his restoration to the present.

"Will you give me a light, please?" she said.

As he held a match to the tip of her cigarette, her face came for a moment into sharp relief. Her eyes were deep pools, fathomless in their shaded brilliancy. Her hair seemed a dark halo as she sat beside him in the luxury of silence. Presently a tiny chirp punctured complete calm.

"If it were not July, but August," he said meditatively, "I should take that for the first cricket. Crickets, then goldenrod, and asters, and the first frost."

"Don't," she said, shivering.

"You don't enjoy anticipation." He was astonished by her vehemence.

"Only anticipation of the past."

"That is a cryptic remark."

"I suppose so," she said; then added, "What I mean is that I only look forward to putting time behind me."

"I should have guessed," he offered, "you were a woman who had everything she wanted."

"I wonder if you know how many women are trying to want the things they have."

"Are n't we all, men and women alike, trying to make the best of it?"

"Men and women, yes. But not the men as the women do. If she makes a mistake, what chance has a woman with her life contained within the circumference of a man's? What chance had I?"

"I'm sorry," he said quietly, and took her hand raised in protest against Fate. He felt her pulses in the finger tips. She trembled and gripped his hand convulsively. He sensed the imminence of tears. But she steadied herself with a sudden effort. She even laughed.

"Moonshine and mush. I'm behaving like a sentimental girl. Will you forgive the imposition?"

"There's nothing to forgive," he protested.

"You lie prettily, but I know the truth. I nearly involved you in a teary tableau. And only husbands are called upon to endure that."

"I can only repeat —" he began.

"Please don't. I'll believe all you want me to believe. We'll go in and drink a toast to friendship. It is a little damp, after all, and I feel a bit unstrung."

They left the garden and entered the silent house. It was very dark.

"There's Chippendale stuff about," said Mrs. Ormsby ahead. "Let me guide you."

"Don't lead me astray," Strong cautioned lightly, as she moved, a dimly defined shape.

"Would n't you like to be?" she answered with a subdued laugh.

Moonlight tolerably dissipated darkness in the room to which they groped their way.

"Is n't it pleasanter without a light?" she asked when he opened his match-box with a snap. "Besides, I suspect my eyes are red. Do you mind?"

"Of course not."

"Then get something to cheer you, and give me the same. And let's sit by the window. We can see the harbor, and we won't have to see the people."

"Sit here," she said, as he bore two glasses pleasantly filled to her.

"Is there room? Be careful you don't spill it."

"Thanks. Yes, plenty of it."

It was an old-fashioned davenport, with high upholstered sides and back. He settled himself with a feeling of pleasant intimacy. There was neither antagonism, nor apprehension, nor any disturbing element in the atmosphere. They sipped and talked with inconsequential lightness, and two tips of red glowed intermittently in the shadow.

"How does this view compare with that from the Ponte Vecchio?" she said after brief silence, as they

sat looking at the shore below them, with its fringe of yellow lights and the harbor satiny dark under the moon.

"That reminds me I want to tell you something."

"But I know it already."

She turned impetuously, and her hand was on his shoulder.

"Are you sure?" he persisted. He felt himself at sea.

"I knew it from the first," she whispered intensely.

Her arms were about his neck, and instinctively he held her closely. Flame-swept, he struggled to retain reason.

"You'll be sorry," he said unsteadily.

"No, no!" she whispered, and drew him irresistibly. In the consuming fever of his blood he was abandoned to delirium.

When the storm was past, fear smote him. It was less conventional fear of the consequences of madness than dread of chains weak arms may forge. Constitutional prudence shrank from subjection to Delilah. He held her passively, her face on his breast. He already pined to be free. She felt his aloofness and clung to him as if hands could hold where the heart refuses to follow.

"You don't despise me?" she whispered desperately.

"No, dear," he answered, very tenderly, for he knew he did not love her.

"Tell me you love me." It was imperious appeal.

"I am very fond of you, dear," he said, and kissed her eyes raised in appeal with a mist of tears.

"You must be — you must." It was a declaration, and an entreaty. She hid her face in his breast and wept, not quietly but shaken with sobbing.

"Don't cry, dear," he said, and stroked her head softly. But the comfort that conquers doubt was not his to give. His thoughts were of the future while she was wrapped in the present. Her weeping gradually diminished until she quietly freed herself and dried her eyes.

"You had better go now," she said.

"But I can't leave you like this."

Desire to know the worst, to have named the penalty of recklessness, urged him to stay.

"I'm all right now," she continued. "It's better for me to be alone. You can come in the morning."

"I'll go, if you wish it," he said.

He extended his hand in farewell, and it seemed ridiculously inadequate. Consciousness of the greatness of a woman's surrender suddenly melted his heart. He kissed her impulsively, and she clung to him, feeling she could not let him go.

"Remember," she said, "I'm not sorry. Good-bye until to-morrow."

Out of the gate he went, and down the hillside street with few lights in the windows. His frame of mind was not that of a hero in the lists of love. Nor was it that of a man crushed by the burden of con-

science. He held himself convicted of weakness, but innocent of criminal intent. That he had jeopardized his freedom was quite incontestably a fact. As an abstract proposition, the situation disclosed to him no reason why Mrs. Ormsby and himself might not still regard themselves as free agents. In due time he must make that clear to her. A certain contingency, however, might give her an irresistible claim.

With purely personal conclusions he mingled reflection upon idiosyncrasies of the double standard. What was conventionally worshiped in a woman was conventionally laughed at in a man. Woman resisting temptation moved in the incense of tradition. But defense of male honor was given over to comic-opera comedians. He did not think that most men felt themselves robbed of a spiritual birthright by this difference and distinction. But it operated, nevertheless, as a weakness. How would Parsifal fare in twentieth-century life?

By orthodox recipe, Strong should have suffered a restless night. But he slept well. A fatalistic strain enabled him to resign to to-morrow its burden.

He awoke physically refreshed, and, splashing through his morning bath, events of the night before seemed remote. It was almost as if they had been told of another man. Sober sense, however, assured him the rôle was his own. Memory had registered, "Come in the morning." Breakfast heartened him to endure an ordeal he could not definitely forecast. It was a bright morning, with a warm, light wind,

and he was not blind to its sweetness as he leisurely proceeded toward Mrs. Ormsby's cottage.

A woman in white was busy with roses in the garden. He knew it was Mrs. Ormsby. The figure, with a certain vigorous elegance of carriage, was unmistakable. Evidently she had not fallen to moping over the night before. Yet he experienced trepidation as he swung open the garden gate. Upon its click she turned quickly and her face lighted up in greeting.

"You're very prompt," she said, cordially extending her hand. "I think you deserve a decoration. Let's see." She surveyed him with critical friendliness. "You're all in gray. I think a pink rose will do." As she clipped a bud she tossed an observation over her shoulder. "Don't you think, anyway, pink is your color rather than red?"

"I am wax in your hands," he answered, and wondered what she meant.

As she adjusted the flower in his buttonhole her face was very near. It occurred to him that he had never seen her so attractive. It was a vivid face, and rest custom and nature enforced upon all Mauwusset had erased traces of lively life of the town. Quite naturally he kissed her, and she as naturally responded. There was nothing painful about this scene in a garden.

"What are you doing this morning?" he asked haphazardly. All that he had half-planned to say was obviously not for the present occasion.

"Oh," she said, "our morning is taken. That is, if you don't punish me for promising without consulting you. Ollie Damerel telephoned me about some tennis and I said you were coming. He at once affably said," — she paused in assumed embarrassment, — then continued mischievously, "Bring along the newly anointed."

"But I have no racquet, no shoes, no tennis clothes," he said. "I did n't bring them."

"That's not an obstacle. Like the Lord, Ollie will provide. It is his business in life to entertain. If you don't want to go, though, I'll tell him it is impossible."

"But I do want to go. Let's."

He had presented himself for the preliminary scourging of Fate, and Fate for the present declined to wield the whip. For that he was grateful. As they walked along Mrs. Ormsby was in a sprightly mood. She had a knack of racy expression; her comment on persons of the hectic circle in which she moved was void of malice. Better than before he understood her general popularity among men.

Damerel's guests were already on the courts, but play was suspended to give them a somewhat boisterous welcome. Pennington turned his racquet into a banjo as he chanted, —

"See, the conquering hero comes."

Strong was visibly embarrassed. Mrs. Ormsby seemed not at all disturbed.

"Be my partner," urged Pennington. "Mrs. Lynne was playing, but she'd be glad to get out. She's really too lazy."

"Thanks, Penny," she said easily. "But I came to play with Mr. Strong."

"Are you perpetually tied to him?" with an injured air.

"I don't know." She surveyed Strong critically, and turned to Pennington with mock anxiety. "Do you think it would be a good thing?"

"It might be helpful to the rest of mankind," he rejoined with a grimace. "Come on, let's play."

Strong's feeling of an alien captive in Rome, following at some conqueror's chariot wheels, vanished with a racquet in his hand. He was a fair player and Mrs. Ormsby sustained the reputation of her set for proficiency in sports, their only religious interest in life. She was even capable of an overhead smash. Pennington, too, played well, with an altitude deadly to lobs; and Mrs. Lynne, slightly indolent, was competent to handle what came her way. It was nip and tuck, with Strong and his partner victorious in a set that trenched upon the luncheon hour. Of the morning was born a spirit of comradeship. Not that Strong regarded Mrs. Ormsby fondly. But he ceased to regard her critically, or with unconfessed apprehension. She was no longer the beast in the jungle.

Luncheon went merrily, with Victrola accompaniment. They had "Snooky Ookums" with their soup,

and were "Waiting for the Robert E. Lee" and their salad at the same time. The barcarolle from "Tales of Hoffmann" floated through the air as coffee flowed down their mouths. And always the clatter of cheerful conversation. It was not especially diverting, but when he remembered populous stolidity of the Seaside, Strong mentally gave thanks.

Being taken for granted that he and Mrs. Ormsby would stay with the party for the day, neither demurred. There were moments when conviction that he moved in reflected light, the queen's favorite of the hour, smote Strong, but he shook off unpleasantness. Certainly, Mrs. Ormsby's attitude was not proprietary. She was merely cordial, with an occasional intimate accent for his ear alone.

The morning spent in exercise, they devoted the afternoon to beholding exertions of others. In Scooset, a summer settlement for storage of the actor's ego in little cottages, a golf match was in progress.

"Why fellers walk miles to swat a ball when they can stand up to a punching-bag gets me," observed Damerel, as he marshaled his party. "But it takes all kinds to make the world."

"Ollie, the Cicero of Mauwusset," commented Pennington, writing gravely on his cuff.

"Stuff it," said Damerel good-humoredly, mounting the box.

He took the reins and they were off. With a lively tooting and cracks of the whip, at which the high-

stepping grays shook their heads more proudly, they swept through the village and out on the road winding to Scooset. Neither the past craving inspection nor the future sealed troubled Strong that hour. Life was a railway journey and he occupied a comfortable compartment.

Trailing a golfer proved even less interesting than watching an actor off the stage. From the modulated simplicity of assorted players they turned to entertainment by one. He was an idol of the fudge-eaters and an artist to boot. His prestige was largely due to virile beauty, the gift of nature. For his distinguished ability, which few admirers appreciated, he had himself to thank. His name was Karl Willett, and he claimed Mrs. Ormsby as an old friend.

"The last time —" he said, as he advanced with outstretched hand.

"At Nice," she pieced out, "five years ago."

"It makes me happier to be so remembered."

Willett's smile was attractive, and his manner modest. In the bungalow to which he conducted them he was a model host. That he admired Mrs. Ormsby was evident, but he was too sophisticated to show how much. That Mrs. Ormsby liked him was evident. How much, was not. Despite his judicious decision that Mrs. Ormsby and himself were still free agents, Strong experienced a twinge of discontent. It was not tactful consideration for friends reunited that moved him to a *tête-à-tête* with Mrs. Lynne, who had little information save what she

gleaned from the bridge table and pickings of society reporters. He was in a gray mood when he climbed to the seat beside Mrs. Ormsby for the ride home.

"The world is a little place," she remarked cheerfully.

"Sometimes," he assented.

"Just think of meeting Karl Willett here after all these years."

"He's an old friend, I suppose?" He queried the obvious.

"Yes, he was Charlie's friend first."

"Charlie?" What did Pennington say about a multitude of admirers?

She laughed at his expression.

"I forgot you did n't know. Charlie was my husband."

He saw in her eyes a dawning smile.

"Well as I know you now, you still interest me," she said. "I can't make out whether you're original, or merely clever. At any rate, there's nobody like you. Are you satisfied with that?"

"I did n't mean to be inquisitive," he explained, a little awkwardly.

"I did n't think you did," she assured him.

Being *sui generis* is not necessarily pleasing, but a compliment is taken for granted. His self-esteem thus caressed, Strong was in fair humor for dinner. He even suffered with resignation the pains and penalties of partnership with Mrs. Lynne at bridge.

"What do you think of my game, Mr. Strong?" she inquired after losing a rubber by criminally careless play.

"That overbidding is paved with good intentions," he replied.

"But I thought that was hell?" She questioned with wrinkled brow.

"It is hell playing with you, Bessie," Pennington explained with cheerful impudence of the irresponsible.

"I'm sure Mr. Strong did n't mean that," she bridled.

"Nothing so mean entered my head," he assured her.

"I do my best," she went on plaintively.

"And that's good enough, Bessie," called Damerel genially from the next table. "I like your game. It's different from the common. Play a rubber with me."

The exchange of partners effected, real peace reigned. Strong succeeded with Mrs. Ormsby, as he had prospered at tennis.

"Hang it! You two play as if you had teamed it for years together," said Pennington, slightly irritated when the last trick was won.

Mrs. Ormsby smiled. "It almost seems that we were made for each other, does n't it?"

It was Pennington that answered, though she looked at Strong.

"When you grow sentimental, Virginia, I'm

afraid to stay in the room. Remember, 'Lucky in love, unlucky in war.' Does it reverse?"

"I don't know," she said. "What is your experience?"

"Expensive to-night," he rejoined, figuring up the score. "I can't play in this place. It's too hard to keep awake. Even the mosquitoes go to sleep."

When the inevitable "night-cap" was consumed, and they were on their way behind a spanking cob, wisdom regained a hearing with Strong.

"There was something I wanted to explain," he said, after what he felt as a boisterous silence.

"What is it?" She spoke cordially, and without constraint.

"It was last night." He hardly knew how to begin.

"Yes?" Her tone was encouraging.

"About the picture in the Louvre, and the Ponte Vecchio, and the rest of it." He plunged in. "Fact is, I was never in Florence. I only know it from what I've heard and read."

On his pause she came to the rescue.

"You must have a good memory. You were accurate on details. I envy you the prospect of seeing it all for the first time. What do you think of 'Penny' as a bridge player?"

"That he is thoroughly feminine in spirit," he replied.

"I think I know what you mean, but I'm afraid to inquire."

He caught her amused expression in the dim light. What he could not quite grasp was her reception of his confession. Or rather, she had not received it at all. She made no more of it than a casual observation. When he thought he was deceiving her, was she amusing herself with him? He arrived at her gate somewhat bewildered.

"Oh, I forgot my parasol," she said as he helped her to alight.

The parasol was secured, and he investigated his pockets to tip the driver. When he turned again, Mrs. Ormsby had vanished. The open door was marked by an aperture of blackness, and her voice came from above as he scraped his feet on the doorstep.

"Find a chair," she called. "I won't be long."

Where he sat the night before he rested again. It was the same moon he regarded, and the same scene. But his frame of mind was different. He had become involved through shirking responsibility. Now he must see that the situation did not become serious. That would be easier than he anticipated. Mrs. Ormsby was only joking in assumption that they had known each other in an earlier generation. Perhaps she felt less deeply about their sudden intimacy than he had supposed. Presumably she was widely experienced, while he was only a novice in affairs of the heart.

"Where are you?" She was almost at his elbow, a white figure in the dusk.

"Here," he said, startled into monosyllabic response.

A moment later she was in his arms. He did not repulse her; he did not reason with her. He was only astonished at the intensity with which she clung to him, and the wild beating of her heart. Mechanically he sought her lips.

"The day has been so long," she murmured.

"Yes," he assented, smoothing her hair.

"Will it always be so when we can't be really together?"

He preferred a kiss to telling a lie.

"You were n't disturbed about Karl Willett, were you?"

"Of course not," he answered with unconscious constraint.

She felt the change and labored to dispel it.

"I told you he was Charlie's friend, and he was kind to me when Charlie died. It happened in England, and I had n't many friends there. Then I liked him for himself. He's really a good sort."

"He seems so," said Strong without enthusiasm. She nestled in his arms.

"You've made a confession; now I'd like to make one to you."

She hesitated, and her attitude was appealing.

"What is it?" He was braced for the shock.

"You are my first love."

He responded to her sudden piquancy, and she continued.

"It may seem queer, but it's true. I was married when I was too young to know. Charlie was a better sportsman than husband. He taught me about men — just the average man — and I've made them friends. But it's never been anything more. I was afraid. Then you came. Now everything is different. Don't you understand?"

"Do you doubt it?"

"But you thought I was rakish at first. If you had n't, I would n't have been provoked, and you would n't have been in danger, and this would n't have happened. Are you sorry?"

"Don't you know?" he asked. He himself did not know, but she found his reply satisfactory.

It was very late, or very early, when he returned to the Seaside. Even the night-blooming bellboy nodded over his book. Strong's feeling was not one of acute regret; rather it was dissatisfaction. He thought of himself as a leaf in the current, occasionally caught in an eddy, held for a while and then released to float on again. There comes a time when the leaf sinks. He did not care to continue the comparison.

Through fear of hurting a woman's feelings he had blundered into the greatest possible injury but one. Morals aside, it was an injury, because he had deceived her. He had lied by his behavior while saving his tongue. But he could not explain now. With everything else, it would be an insult to her intelligence. He must trust to luck. Many summer loves

are blighted when winter winds blow cold. It might please Fortune to save them with mutual relief.

But after all, his rôle was more difficult than he anticipated. He was constitutionally temperate, as the self-centered are apt to be. Of this fact he himself was well aware. He had long envied the heedless their divine madness. He envied them the more because superior clearness of vision did not save him from playing the fool. Licensed by the head, weakness is vice. Spiritual intelligence that could not save him sat in judgment upon his conduct.

It was one of Fate's little ironies that reserve dictated by his secret made Mrs. Ormsby more tender. Gayly casual with others, in their hours together she lavished love with humble pride in its prodigality. It was keener pain that he had a mental grasp of the richness of her offering. Had he not experienced the galling of a loveless yoke, he would have been tempted to salve conscience by a gamble in marriage. As it was, he took queer pride in reflecting that Eleanor, whose face came before him now in pleasant sadness, was likely to be the bride of his life, as she had been the unhappy bride of his youth.

A husband, he had been a failure through lack of love and inability to pretend. As a lover, he was measurably successful. He viewed his performance with critical eyes. The years teach all artifice, that society may be endurable.

Painful as it was, the satiric side of the situation

appealed to Strong. His holiday had been turned into harassing labor. To grasp a mood with which he was not in sympathy, and variously respond in the unspoken language of love, taxed his ingenuity and kept him on the rack. He wondered at his success. Where was woman's intuition? How could Mrs. Ormsby fail to penetrate his pretense? He worked the harder to blind her. After all, it was only for a time.

That a blonde attracts a brunette; the stout, the spare; the petite, the tall, is a theory of opposites more demonstrable in character. The most striking illustration is gravitation of the tropic woman to the temperate man. Reserve increased devotion Strong wished to die. He came to dread Mrs. Ormsby, as many women dread the man they must deceive.

There was still a week of July when suddenly the situation grew unbearable. Steaming in sultry heat, New York seemed a haven of rest. Grant, the partner on duty, promptly sent the telegram of recall requested.

"What's it about?" asked Mrs. Ormsby, when Strong presented the yellow slip.

"I don't know," he answered. "I think it's about a Montreal church."

"When must you go?"

"This afternoon, — I think."

He sought the semblance of blended concern, of anxiety over some matter of professional importance and keen regret at parting.

"Oh," she said, as if startled. "That's sudden, but you know best."

They were standing in her garden, and she went on clipping blindly. Blossoms fell under her unheeding fingers. There was something symbolic in the shining shears. So Fate, with bandaged eyes, cut human blossoms from the tree of life. And some fell young, and some went ungathered until they withered. Luckiest were those cut off in their prime.

With a mental shrug he returned to reality.

"How shall we spend the morning?"

"There's your packing."

Her voice was natural, save for a throaty quality that possibly denoted the tightness of repressed feeling. A shrub seemed to require close attention, and he could not see her face.

"That's done," he said; "I packed when the message came, to give us more time. Shall we stay here?"

"And spend the morning in mournful farewell?"

She turned, and her face was mirthful.

"I detest 'Good-byes,' and women who act like sprinklers. We'll go to Ollie's for some tennis, and he'll ask us to luncheon, and drive you to the boat. Penny will deliver the valedictory. You'll have a full escort."

"Then I won't see you again alone."

In spite of relief, he felt a bit chagrined at her nonchalant air,

"Have n't you seen me alone enough?"

"Of course not," he protested.

"Then you shall have a chance later."

He experienced again the sensation of critical inspection that had irritated in first stages of their acquaintance. It was momentary. He dismissed it as due to guilty conscience. There was no suspicion in her eyes.

"Let me decorate you now," she said. "Not for the last time, but for the trip. What shall it be? A bachelor's button, I think. Will you keep your right to wear it until I see you again?"

"Promised."

He paid her a kiss, and remembered how much he had omitted to tell her. He never mentioned his marriage. It seemed hard to explain without leaving at least an inference of bereavement, which would be hypocritical, or confessing a mistake, thus slighting Eleanor. General avoidance of the confessional was due to lack of unlocking love. More than once he thought it odd that Mrs. Ormsby always came to mind as Mrs. Ormsby, never as Virginia. Despite physical intimacy, she was a stranger to his mind, as well as an alien to his heart.

"It's a pretty place," he said, with a last look, as they turned away from the gate.

"More than ever to me now." She shared his survey. "I wonder if you'd like my other place."

"I guess so. But you never mentioned it."

"You never gave me a chance. I could n't come to you with a list of my goods and chattels."

"Am I forgiven?"

"There's nothing to forgive. I suppose the fact that you never ask anything, and never demand anything, makes me more eager to give."

"That's dear of you," he said. Feeling for the sentiment more than the speaker softened his voice. "I can only look my appreciation. We're in the street. Now, where's the house? New York?"

"No, I did n't mean that. The difference between New York houses is that some are more vulgar or more expensive than others. People like Ollie keep them to entertain people like me. My place is a little island in Maine. I call it mine because I'm the only outsider. Just fishermen's houses, and the beach and the cliff, and a few acres where sheep graze. It is n't on the map, and the yachts all sail by. I can see them from my piazza. It's farther from New York than earth is from heaven. I could n't stand it in the winter. Do you think you could stand it in summer?"

No vision of penal servitude was betrayed by his expression.

"I'll try to come in August, if I can get away," he said, "and you want me."

"That last is unnecessary." She caressed his arm. "When I go, I'll write you, and you may come any time. I'll be sitting on the piazza, waiting for a strange boat. It will be you, because there's nobody else to have a guest from the mainland. Don't let me know in advance. I want it for a surprise." She

laughed a little; her voice was wistful. "Here I am, behaving like a romantic schoolgirl. I never was romantic when I should have been. Is it going to hurt me now?"

"Not if I can help it."

He was himself unconscious of any double meaning. Sympathy he would as readily have given a stranger wrapped her for the moment. Feeling it, she was at peace.

At Damerel's hearty welcome awaited them; and it was quickly supplemented with equally hearty expression of regret.

"Though I'm a liar," confessed Pennington, when he had mopped his eyes. "The rest of us will get some chance now. I'm almost bursting with love."

"It has n't fattened you much, Penny," said Mrs. Ormsby with an indulgent glance.

"You're grown cynical, Virginia," he mournfully remarked. "You never used to find me lacking."

"To be truthful, I never found you at all."

"I think," he said briskly, "it's a good morning for tennis."

"Do you fear Penny?" asked Mrs. Ormsby humorously, as she walked with Strong to the court.

"He's too much like an illustrated weekly."

"I don't believe," she hazarded, "you know what jealousy is."

"I'll leave it for you to teach me," he suggested.

He saw her fingers tighten on the racquet handle, and she spoke gravely. "I trust I never shall."

The morning passed pleasantly, to Strong at least, and the pace at luncheon was accelerated by assorted toasts. Some were in worse taste than others, but nobody noted that difference much. Mrs. Ormsby seemed much like the woman he had seen in the Canadian woods. He caught himself wondering if, after all, that were not her natural self.

The attention of a collective farewell was gratefully received. He appreciated it the more when he saw a forlorn couple awaiting in quiet misery the hoarse whistle that announced the boat's departure. It was their first affair, and the boy was to go. He tried to be jocular, but his eyes betrayed him. The girl was pale and quiet. She wore his fraternity pin, and once she instinctively caressed his arm with a protective air. Speculating upon what he had never experienced, Strong wondered which was sadder, — knowledge that love cannot endure, or hopeless devotion that deems itself immortal. His reverie was broken when Pennington tendered a handkerchief with a flourish and giggle.

"Cry in this," he urged solicitously.

"Is there any crying needed?"

Strong posed the question as he would have given a begging dog a bone.

"Hear him," adjured Pennington, "with this visible evidence of all he's leaving behind."

"You're the most visible thing on the wharf," Strong suggested. "Are you thinking of yourself?"

"I'm not thinking of a thing. I'm thinking of a goddess. Out of respect to her I decorate you."

From his pocket he drew a large crape bow.

"Take him away, please, Ollie," said Mrs. Ormsby, and Damerel moved obedient to her request. While a friendly scuffle occupied the others she turned with a wry smile to Strong.

"I know you hate it, but it's easier than being alone. It is n't necessary to say the things we feel. Only tell me you are n't sorry."

All she had given was concentrated in her appeal, and he sought involuntarily to draw the curtains of his soul. The whistle's urgent summons came to his aid. "I don't need to tell you," he said, as he took her hand. The crowd eddied about them in the press of farewell.

"Remember your promise about Maine," she urged as Pennington led a farewell salute.

With a great churning the boat got under way. It scraped by the groaning piles and picked up speed in clear water, stirring the glassy expanse into waves on which little boats bobbed like boys at see-saw. The people on the wharf waved their hats and handkerchiefs, and the passengers waved back. Strong's last impression was of Pennington shooting his cuffs as he waved his arms in leading some inane chorus. He knew it must be inane if Pennington sang it.

With a half-circle, the boat rounded the lighthouse and the wharf was lost to view. Strong turned from the rail with the feeling of duty discharged.

He connected it with duty because it was disagreeable. Now it was over, he felt relief. The day was very hot, and passengers more energetic than himself possessed all seats in the shade. A paper he bought saluted him from its first page: "NEW YORK IN THROES OF ANOTHER HEAT WAVE." Yet he was nowise disturbed.

The sunburned faces of men and women about him wore an expression of forced cheer, the determined gayety of a returning vacationist. To themselves they seemed to say: "You cannot have your cake, and eat it, too. The trip has done me a world of good." Strong was pleased to feel a little superior. He had come to Mauwusset without strong emotion of any sort. But he left it more eagerly than a boy released from school, and with kindred elation. If there was a rod in pickle for him, danger was not imminent.

With Marcus Aurelius for a pocket companion he dismissed the immediate past. But he did not read long. High thoughts and a high temperature did not mate, with the sun beating down and fretful crying of children uneasy in the strong swell of the Sound. Presently adults with poor sea-legs began a downward procession, forcing a painful air of unconcern. A deck less cluttered with humanity made it more comfortable to think.

They passed a lightship, swinging on its cable, and Strong wondered how its crew could endure winter and summer with no social relations save the vague

tie of the daily press, and no occupation but basket-making, or cards, for leisure that made up most of their time. Many persons bored him, and he had often bored himself. He attributed the difficulty to lack of any strong interest. Why he did not care more for anybody or anything he could not tell. What he himself felt, instability with an appearance of stability, was seemingly not evident to others. The ground thus covered, he tucked the question away. He had no passion for a proved answer.

The shadows lengthened, and twilight came on. Gulls screamed their salutation to the sinking sun. Quivering slightly, the steamer drove through placid waters with a steady humming of its engines. Strong found it soothing as he sat and smoked. When day was done, it seemed like the closing of a book. The first star was an ornament upon its cover.

CHAPTER XII

STRONG had never felt for New York that passionate and possessive admiration seldom seen in the native-born. As he disembarked, however, it seemed like home. For it was his refuge from danger.

Grant greeted him at the office with mingled pleasure and concern.

"Here I am," he observed, "packed and ready to go; but I did n't expect you. I could n't think of any pleasant reason for coming back to this stoke-hole ahead of time. Did a lady break and fry your heart?"

"No, I just got tired of loafing. The place was n't as interesting as I thought it would be."

After playing a part with a woman for a fortnight, it was simple enough to bluff a man.

Grant closed his desk with a cheerful bang. "Well," he said, "I'm not curious. Only I promise you not to intrude before the end of my vacation. I'll use it to the last second, and thanks for the gift of part of yours. You're a Santa Claus out of season. Keep out of the hot sun. I'll send you cooling post-cards of Bar Harbor in winter."

When he was gone, Strong settled down to work with a sigh of content. Sensitive to environment, his strongest affection was for familiar places. The familiar desk, the familiar room, the work into which he swung as if he had left it only yesterday, and the

city's voice, a distant but mighty humming, fused in atmosphere indescribably soothing. As he studied a plan he surprised himself in a whistle.

He enjoyed the city as a convalescent fresh from the hospital relishes home. It was good to sit relaxed in the club, when evening came on and electric fans coöperated with the contents of tall glasses in refreshing members whose wives and sweethearts were still on the treadmill of domestic routine in summer homes, or cooped in some expensive hive of mountain or seashore. As a liberated man, Strong himself found added zest in the somewhat vacuous gayety of roof gardens. With the great brotherhood of bleacherites he discovered intimate interest in New York's baseball heroes, "The Giants." On a festive day he even explored the wonders of Cairo in Coney.

The few who knew him enough to note his habits marveled somewhat at the change. He himself was hardly aware of it until Sammy White, whose only holiday trip seemed likely to be the last excursion with nodding funeral plumes, ventured a jest.

"You did n't happen to marry in Mauwusset?" he suggested, after his customary prelude to conversation, "Boy, take the orders."

"What makes you think so?"

Strong smiled, but shivered inwardly.

"You act like an escaped husband. Frisky as a two-year-old."

"It's second childhood, or something of that sort, I guess. Here's to the third childhood."

"No more for me," said Sammy sagely, "unless I can keep my thirst."

Sammy's insistent advice had sent him to Mauwusset, and Sammy's careless remark precipitated reflection upon what had happened there. Now that he yielded, he wondered consideration had been postponed so long. A fortnight without any sign of remembrance was rather shabby treatment of Mrs. Ormsby. True, she had not written, and she had not asked him to write. But some things were taken for granted. Had she been merely the companion of a summer flirtation, he would have written, possibly expressing more concern than he felt. The difficulty was the implied obligation to express a good deal not felt at all. However, something must be done. That decided, he addressed himself to the task.

As he sat down to write, a quotation popped into mind. "The least said, soonest mended." That did n't fit. If he followed inclination, he would say nothing at all. He heard the clicking of balls in the billiard room overhead, and bit his pen in envious frame of mind. Reticent in speech where his own feelings were concerned, he was still more averse to confidences on paper. He had a feeling there was indecorum in such scuttling of self-control.

What he finally wrote and posted might have passed muster with the careful mother of a *débutante*. It was about the city in summer, when the northeast and the southwest send regiments of tourists to illustrate for one another what real New

Yorkers are like. He made his work very pressing and pictured Sammy, the night-blooming bachelor, as an illustration of what he himself would probably become. And when he dropped the letter in the box he felt as if he had wantonly kicked some affectionate four-footed companion. Of course, the comparison was not flattering to Mrs. Ormsby. On the other hand, neither was it uncomplimentary. As a rule, humans were incapable of self-abandonment. While he was sorry he happened to be the recipient, he felt admiration for the unquestioning generosity of Mrs. Ormsby's surrender. With many miles of sea between them, he no longer feared a campaign of conquest to change an individual into a husband.

In his mail, next morning, was a letter addressed in the firm, angular hand that had once puzzled him in Mauwusset. He knew it now, and thought it odd he had written just too early to know what she had to say. Her letter must have arrived in New York before his own left the city. The postmark was a strange one. He had never heard of "Castine." With more curiosity than apprehension he broke the seal.

"Dearest," she began with characteristic frankness. It was not her way to quibble. "It has been a long two weeks, the longest I ever saw. For I never missed any one so much I could n't somehow fill their place. This time the remedies have failed. So here I am, in my island again. If I can't be with you, I'd rather be alone. I'm hoping you'll be able to

come. You remember I said, 'any time.' From Castine it is n't a long sail to the island. Just say you want to go across to Brewster. I shall be waiting. V."

That was all. No protestation, not even an intimation of neglect. She was true to the code of good sportsmanship. A stout heart and a high head to the finish. She moved him now more than ever before. He wished he could go to her with the crown of love she craved. That was the way it would end in a story, a boat crossing the bay, a woman watching it with anxiety, the joy of recognition, lovers in each other's arms, and life throbbing with triumphal music. It was a pity he understood himself so well. Or rather it was a pity he had so little to give. He could figure to a nicety just how miserable they would both be after six months together. To go to her now would be an irretrievable step, and he dared not take it. He knew what must be sealed to her. For her sake, no less than his own, he must be cruel to be kind.

At first he thought of letting her letter go unanswered. But that was too brutal. He could not bear to have her think of him as utterly base. A note of declination, with just a hint of his feeling that the situation into which they had stumbled should be taken as temporary, would serve and in some measure save her pride. What he finally wrote was a friendly and slightly sentimental note, lamenting pressure of business that made it impossible for him

to leave the city. He lied in what he esteemed a good cause. The Montreal church was bothersome. Some snarl in specifications necessitated a trip in that direction. It was nearly September then. By the time he could leave she would be away from the coast. The New England shore was cheerless in autumn. It was hard luck, but he would have to wait until she returned to town.

She did not question his sincerity, but acknowledgment of his note of apology was more guarded than her first letter. Strong fancied he detected the birth of doubt. He wanted that, yet it made him uncomfortable. He sent a book and some bonbons to console her. Being alone on an island must be dreary at best.

Chrysanthemums blossomed in the florist's window, and waving locks cushioned the football warrior's head, before he saw Mrs. Ormsby again. He had been able to forget her for days, and experience at Mauwusset seemed more like an episode than a tragic adventure.

She did not summon him. She merely announced her return.

I am in town again, and staying at the Wiltmere.
V.

It was almost as brief as the first suggestion of her serious interest. She took nothing for granted, or she took everything for granted. It was for him to say what their relations should be. Because he

shrank from determining, he invited her to the opera, where they occasionally listened to music when conversation about them was not too loud. It was not a place inviting to discussion of intimate affairs, nor was a restaurant crowded with spenders anxious for the approval of a haughty head waiter a place in which one felt himself irresistibly moved to disclose heart secrets.

As they were whirled uptown, Strong nerved himself for what he had to do. Resolution was fortified by remembrance of a careless remark. It was a man's voice he heard as they entered the restaurant, "Mrs. Ormsby's got a new 'one." If she heard it, she gave no sign. For him it had poisoned the evening. After all, he might be one in a procession of lovers. He revolted at the thought of being worn as a pet for a season.

At the Wiltmere he helped her to alight and raised his hat in farewell.

"Are n't you coming in?" she asked. Her surprise was evident.

"I'm afraid I can't," he answered; then added lamely, "I'm sorry."

"I wish you would."

Her voice was low, with a note of entreaty. The chauffeur stared up the street, but the cant of his head betrayed lively curiosity. Strong took haphazard the first excuse that came to mind.

"I have a business engagement at the club. It's for one o'clock. There is n't time for me to stop."

"Well," she said quietly, "you know best. I'm sorry you can't stay. Good-night."

She turned away and did not look back.

"The Charlton Club," he said curtly as he entered the cab.

Jolted about in spasmodic speeding, he did not view his achievement with satisfaction. He had made the break, but how awkwardly. It was possible to make her understand without playing the schoolboy. He might have saved a little dignity and made the thing less barefaced. At any rate, it was done. And he would never be such a fool again.

He dismissed his cab at the club, but did not enter. He was in no mood for the society of midnight "Oh-be-joyfuls." Neither did he feel any inclination for bed. Perhaps walking awhile would steady his nerves. The world and his wife were at home, but some of society was still abroad. For the most part, it rode in cabs with no more than a glimpse of snowy shirt-front or a woman's profile for the passer-by. But sometimes it emerged from a glittering wine-room, with devil-may-care assurance on the part of the male and saucy hilarity from his bird-of-paradise companion. On the primrose path that legendarily leads to destruction they seemed to be having a good time. Strong envied them their capacity for animal pleasure. After all, were they less admirable than members of more pretentious circles with one commandment, "Thou shalt not be found out."

Continence, morality, fear of God, — these were

preached and doubtless respected by most. But how many practiced them? Most men, and necessarily women, too, were creatures of fate, or children of circumstance, whichever one wished to call it. He himself had been unlucky and lucky, too. He had been involved with possibility of irretrievable disaster. But each time the coil had loosened. One could not depend upon continuance of such luck. He must try to be careful.

He awoke next morning at broad daylight, and lay staring at the wall. His eyes rested on a photograph of Eleanor that caught and held his attention. It was always there, but he seldom noted it. It usually passed with the bracket Minerva, the etching of Cologne Cathedral, the bronze lion on green marble, — with twenty other things he would have instantly missed but seldom consciously perceived.

He did not know why, but that day the likeness stood forth. He felt almost as if Eleanor herself had returned in the flesh. There was nothing spectral about it. It was a photograph taken before their marriage and kept as a souvenir of a characteristic happy mood.

Now the picture started a train of thought. Perspective improved by time showed her generous and stanch. Certain comparisons not definitely formulated brought her fine qualities into sharp relief. She had deserved well of life, and through him life had treated her shabbily.

He had been neglectful. She was buried in Peach-

ton because she wished to rest near him. And he had not visited the cemetery for two years. Excepting once, when he sent a check to the caretaker, he had not even thought of the place. He would go that day and make sure she suffered no advertised neglect.

It was the afternoon of an important football game, the afternoon of an interesting polo match, and so on. His world was busy with week-end diversions.

"Where are you going this afternoon?" inquired an acquaintance at lunch.

"To the cemetery," he literally replied.

"If you don't cheer up," said his inquisitor critically, "you'll be a kill-joy to the corpse."

It was not a long ride to Peachton, as the commuter measures time. He reached its brick-box station within the hour, and set out for the cemetery. Nobody he met remembered him, and he was glad of it. He disliked to tell the idly curious what he was doing, and where he was living, besides parrying transparent efforts to learn, without asking point-blank, whether he was married again.

Peachton was sufficiently urban to have evolved beyond regarding the cemetery as a trysting-place. He saw no one as he opened the neat iron gate and heard it click behind him. Advancing in the main thoroughfare, from which paths branched to right and left, he noted with approval the well-kept lots. Suddenly he paused perplexed. He could not remember where his lot was. He could not tell where

his wife was buried. It was a humiliating lapse of memory. He concentrated with knitted brows, and what he sought came back to him. On the right, and upon a knoll, the highest point in the cemetery, what was left of Eleanor lay under the stone that refreshes remembrance. The grass was still fresh and carefully trimmed, and upon the grave some one had placed a handful of simple flowers.

It was mellow weather. Strong remembered it was such a day in autumn when Eleanor was buried. Six years ago, and all that time she had been at rest. To him much had happened with little profit. As far as he could see, that was the experience of most persons, only the majority were fortunate in not knowing it. Ignorance was not bliss, but it often spelled "content." It kept people pulling in the traces, so the world's work might be done.

Dimming of sunlight in a passing cloud suggested thought of time. He had to go, if he wished to avoid a pallid dinner in Peachton's only hotel. Starting briskly, he paused after a few steps. When would he come again? Perhaps never. So many things might happen. He retraced his steps, and knelt beside the grave. Hastily, even furtively, he kissed the turf beneath which she lay. Then he rose and set out at a rapid gait, walking as if anxious to leave something behind him. He dined at the club that night, and found comfort in its companionship. It was good to be where nobody cared much about him, in the society of unquestioning males.

Thanksgiving Day came and the busy season of those who do their Christmas shopping early. Since the night of their abrupt parting, Strong had seen Mrs. Ormsby but once. Then she was motoring with Damerel and fleeting vision assured him she was normally dashing. He was glad to think so.

Whether the dead past has buried its dead no one can determine. Such Yuletide spirit as Strong was able to summon he had squelched abruptly. When he took the letter from the pile on his desk he did not open it at once. Neither did he continue on his way to breakfast. What was in the envelope addressed with that angular energy so well remembered? He thought of a Chinese victim of royal displeasure receiving his doom in a little inlaid box containing a silken cord. Was a cord to be drawn about his own neck? With a resolute slash he opened the envelope and drew forth its contents. It was not a voluminous note, crowding the margin and choking the page. The sentence was inside. He opened to a single line: —

I must see you.

V.

What for? Sickening fear assailed him. Then he called himself a fool and impatiently put it aside. But it would not remain in exile. It returned to penetrate his armor of resolve. He summoned courage for the ordeal. What had passed gave her a claim he could not deny, if she had need to assert it.

He had recognized that contingency in the beginning, and he admitted it now. If the worst had happened, he wanted to know, and to have it over with. He found the Wiltmere in the telephone book and asked for Mrs. Ormsby. When she answered the call he stripped conversation of preliminaries.

"Are you free this afternoon?"

"Yes," she said.

Evidently she knew his voice, as he recognized hers.

"Will you meet me at Sherwin's at five?"

"Yes," she said.

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye," she replied.

He heard the click as she hung up the receiver. It was now nine o'clock. He went about the normal business of the day. Because he had a feeling that to-morrow everything might be different, he was scrupulously attentive to duties. When he closed his desk, it seemed to him a farewell.

He was late at Sherwin's. Among many women who read, or wrote or nibbled bonbons, all awaiting the inevitable man, Mrs. Ormsby was hard to find. At last he found her in a corner. Usually he had seen her the center and soul of hilarity. Now she was sitting with a certain air of remoteness, alone.

"Please excuse me for being late," he said, when he had run the gantlet of feminine curiosity.

"It does n't matter. I had nothing to do."

As they threaded their way out, he took swift

inventory of her appearance. There was no conspicuous change, but he marked a tired look in her eyes. He took in an impression of tension and fatigue. The satrap of the tea room bore down upon them as they stood at the entrance. "Where shall we sit?" he asked.

"Anywhere," she replied.

This was a new and passive woman.

"Let's get into the thick of things."

She said nothing, but gave him the ghost of a smile. As they followed a bustling waiter it occurred to him he had made a tactless remark.

"Will you —" he began, as the waiter solicitously shook out their napkins.

"You seem to remember," she said.

"Two Martinis."

When the waiter was gone, they looked at each other questioningly. It was not antagonism they felt. Dread sealed their lips while about them cups rattled, glasses clinked, and conversation ran riot with the staccato clatter of many women. The orchestra was galloping through a tango, to which many half-consciously responded with undulant motions. Then it switched to more familiar syncopation, and all about them began a nervous shuffling of feet. Led by a girl whose voice was like a fretted violin string, a party near by ventured to sing: —

"At the devil's ball, at the devil's ball,
Dancing with the devil — oh, the little devil!
Dancing at the devil's ball."

Hilarious prelude to execution. Would the waiter never come? When he did, they would drink — to what? The suspense was intolerable. Mrs. Ormsby seemed at once remote and oppressively near. Of what was she thinking, with that veiled look? It was as if he saw her spectrally in a troubled hour of night.

“Why beat about the bush?”

The abruptness and form of his question astonished him as much as the fact that he spoke at all. It was involuntary, like the nervous pressure of a finger on a trigger. Mrs. Ormsby did not start. She came back to him as one who closes a book and turns to a questioner.

“Have I done anything to offend you?”

It was a relief that she spoke directly, and without emotional stress. He dreaded hysteric virtuosity.

“No.”

It was a cold and curt reply, but he found no words to amplify it. She seemed absorbed in the pattern of the table linen, following soaring convolutions of a vine. Air heavy with fusing perfumes from many women was no longer charged with febrile excitement. To the soothing measures of a popular waltz heads moved in the great room. Strong thought of the sea of millinery as a concourse of tufted birds. Then his eyes came back to Mrs. Ormsby. Her face was curiously calm. And her voice, too, seemed devoid of emotion.

“I needed you very much.”

"Was it—?"

"Yes."

He fumbled the question she perfectly understood.

"Of course I am ready —" he pulled up quickly for the waiter was at his side. "Happy days," he said, as he raised his glass, then put it down, confusedly feeling the mockery of his toast. When such privacy as confusion affords was restored he began again.

"Whatever I can do —"

"There's nothing to do," she said quietly.

"But I thought you said —" Again he stuck.

"I went through it alone."

"You should have come to me," he said, relief warming his voice.

"When you were not coming to me?" she questioned.

"But a thing like that," he urged. He found the subject difficult.

"I did n't want that kind of hold. And I could n't stand having you marry me to cancel a debt. You must come to me free, if you do come. I suppose it was foolish to ask for this meeting. I ought to know what silence means. But I thought you might be hurt somehow: that there might be something I could explain."

"No," he said slowly, "I don't think there is any misunderstanding."

"Then it's just that you don't care for me any more."

She leaned on the table, her face in her hands, and asked her question frankly. There was no reproach in look or tone, but he felt like one alone on a field swept by grape and canister. He summoned fortitude to stand by his guns. She had attacked with frankness. In defense only sincerity would serve.

"I don't think I ever cared for you — as you did for me. I did n't understand at first. Then I thought I might be mistaken. It seemed cheeky to suppose you cared so much on short acquaintance. I ought to have been frank, of course, but I hated to hurt your feelings. And if it was only summer madness, one of the attachments people like to forget, I meant to leave you perfectly free. I took it for granted you'd come to me. I'm not expressing myself well. I never can talk well about anything of this sort. But you understand — don't you?"

He put his question as a condemned prisoner might address the court. She considered it with the air of one weighing something remote from personal interest.

"Yes," she said at length, "I think I understand. It's a pity we both misunderstood before. You thought I was gay."

"No," he protested; "I did n't say that."

"You did n't say it, but you implied it. Never mind. It does n't matter now. And I thought you were shy when you were only cold. I don't know why you drew me so. How foolish women are." She smiled, and Strong felt it like a lash. "Little as you

have to give, if you had loved me only that much, I would have been happy. I always knew I could worship, and I was afraid. So I waited until I was thirty-four, and threw myself into the arms of a man whose second thought was how to get away."

"Now that you know the truth, I am ready to marry you."

"Now I don't want you to marry me. Do you intend to be droll?" She looked at him curiously, and he felt himself contemptible. "This is the time to be honest, if you never were with yourself before. But don't misunderstand me, please. It was n't your fault in the beginning. It was my lead, and you responded, as most men would. And most men, I suppose, would shrink from telling a woman that they only took her to avoid embarrassment. You see, I thought you were not an ordinary man. I thought I knew men, and I only knew a male type. But don't be so modest, please, again. There'll be other women."

"I don't think so," he said moodily.

"Oh, yes, there will, whether you seek them or not. There's something about you that draws the feminine. I can see it now, when it is too late to do me any good. It's the indifference that seems like a challenge. And you have learned to hide it. Other women must have taught you that. I was never curious about any predecessors, was I?"

"No one could be less so," he said.

"That is n't true. I was curious. Women always

want to feel they are a man's first love. Men are anxious to be a woman's last. But I did n't ask because I thought you would tell me anything you wanted me to know. Now I don't want you to tell. I only ask you to remember you owed me something, and it was n't paid. So I'm left bankrupt in heart and body."

"What can I do?" He spoke in desperation.

"Nothing. That's the pity of it. I'm only an affliction, to be turned into a memory you'll want to erase. And I don't want to be just that. With all the pain, I'm glad I've known you. If I had n't, I might have died without knowing what love is. That would be worse. But I'm talking a good deal about things I never talked about before. Let's get back to familiar ground. We'll drink your health, and a happy life."

"I'd rather drink to you." He hesitated, raising his glass.

"Oh, no. Let's be reasonable, even in the toasts."

She smiled as she drank. "If you don't mind," she continued, "I think I'll go now. I remember Penny asked me to dine with him, and I said I would let him know. It's late, but he's a faithful creature. It's a pity we impose on those that care most for us. Please forgive me. I did n't mean to be ill-natured." She put her hand on his arm, as he sat in mute distress.

"You are n't," he said huskily. "You're too generous."

"That's the nicest thing you ever said to me." She smiled again. "Now come away from this place. We'll leave the ghosts behind."

"I'll take you home," he said when they reached the street.

"I'd rather not. Time is limited, and we're going different ways. Just put me in a cab, please."

"Very well," he answered, signaling a hawk-eyed chauffeur, who came up with a flourish and opened his cab with a bang. As she entered she turned and gave him her hand: "Good-bye, and good luck — always."

"Thank you," he said, and gripped her fingers.

Their last contact was her friendly look as the cab started with a jerk and disappeared in the maze of Broadway. He did not care to ride. He craved contact, the jostling street crowd. Unstable as it was, it seemed assurance of the aggregate solidity of everyday life. In his own world there were no standards and no gods.

CHAPTER XIII

STRONG found in music what many find in the Church. It was a drug that silenced remorse and smothered thought. It was a perfume to his soul. He abandoned himself to it as a drug-eater abandons himself to dreams. He was not exalted by it, but he was solaced. It shut out the world and obliterated the hereafter. He heard it and saw it, too. With closed eyes he beheld it rolling before him as masses of color, as clouds, as bright landscapes and wavering mist. And he saw it all lazily, casually, as the solitary beholder of a leisurely pageant.

He had no hope of heaven, but Beethoven made him think of it as possible. In weeks of dejection following his last meeting with Mrs. Ormsby he became a frequent visitor at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. In its shaded light he somehow saw himself more kindly, and he heard the organ as a mighty voice of love. Always he waited for the fleeting touch of exaltation that sometimes came in flute-like soaring of boys singing as angels dreamed of sing.

That he would regain in fact poise never disturbed to appearances he did not doubt. He knew by experience transition in store. Anything different was quite out of the question. What he could feel was as evident as what he could not be. He felt that

he understood himself better than most men, perhaps too well. He was frank in confession of spiritual atrophy. He had not tried to serve two masters. He had neither loved God nor hated Mammon. And neither holding to one nor despising the other, he had neglected both. It occurred to him as in a sense humorous that he had never answered the question, "Under which King?" So he was without strong root in life. He had only himself to lean on, and what strength was there in a bending reed?

What were the experiences of other men? Surely his own were not typical. It seemed to him that the average man's safety from many love affairs was his capacity for absorption in one. Lacking that rudder, he was abandoned to the currents of an uncharted sea. From the shore of friendship he should never again embark. That idea had occurred to him before, but not with sufficient strength. He felt confidence in his ability to hold to it now.

His convalescence completed, he did an astonishing thing. When the telegram was dispatched he was only able to account for it by the fact that spring stirs in the blood vague longing for native scenes. But he had never before pined for Lyme. And he was by no means sure that he pined for it now. But his sister was there, the last of the family, and he had not seen her for years. He had even invented an excuse of business to avoid attending her wedding. Her husband he remembered as the tow-headed son of a tombstone dealer, a man of acid piety. There

were two children to whom he sent presents each Christmas. He knew them only by name. With the impulse of duty strong upon him, he felt he ought to show some appreciation of family ties.

Of course his sister was there. To the best of his recollection, she was always there, except for two weeks in August, when she regularly went with the children to some beach where the almost well-to-do kept house somewhat less efficiently than they did at home, and plumed themselves upon the pleasant change. Her husband never had a vacation, except to go to a medical convention. He was a general practitioner where much was trusted to the mercy of the Lord.

Strong was no sooner aboard the train than he repented somewhat of his enterprise. Memories quiet for years returned to remind him of unpleasant childhood. Even now he could not regard it with indifference, or humor, or complacency. What he had felt was only seared over. But he resisted recurrence as humiliation. The train boy came through the car, staggering under a load of chocolates, chewing gum, and fiction. He was crying Robert Chambers's latest, and George Barr McCutcheon's "great mystery story." Among the others was "Jean Christophe," the end of his stormy life. Strong took it for an antidote. He felt kinship with one who stumbled but always struggled on, an invincible soul.

Penetrating New England, the train entered a region of frame houses and factories; of flag stations

and farmhouses set on lonely hills; of agriculture with bare subsistence; and of manufactures with scanty livelihood for swarming hands. It was early spring with Nature at her superficial worst; sodden soil, bare trees, mud and winter rubbish in unkempt back yards. The squalid *ensemble* was forced upon the traveler's attention. Strong regarded it with repugnance. He had the hedonist's inclination, without the hedonist's capacity for delight.

Nearing Lyme, features of the landscape fitted like links in a chain. There was the pond miscalled a "lake," the hill crowned with spruce and birches, and the spire of the Congregational meeting-house, seen first of all in the village before the train rumbled through the cut. As it bore on, with a strenuous whistle for a grade crossing, he picked out the houses that he knew. And he knew nearly all. Building was not brisk in Lyme.

The same station master, ticket agent, and freight handler presided on the platform, unchanged save in the grayness of his straggling beard. And the loafers were the same, though they had different names. His sister he recognized when she came toward him, tugging a bashful boy and a girl. She was pleasant-looking, and wore eyeglasses with sedate dignity befitting the doctor's wife. It occurred to him that he ought to kiss her, but he shook hands with her instead. As they entered a carryall drawn by a fat bay the station agent paused in wrestling with a trunk.

"Well," he observed, "you got back."

"Yes," said Strong. There was nothing else to say.

"How have you been?" asked his sister when they were jogging along.

"Very well," he said, as one answers a stranger, then took his turn.

"How are you all?"

"Quite well," she answered.

"How is Dick doing?"

"He has all he can do," with wifely pride. "I'm almost afraid he will break down."

From the health of the family they turned to the generation in Lyme. One by one, worthies he had known were ticketed dead or placed in present relationships. When that was over he felt uncomfortable and a bit irritated. After eight years' separation there should be something personal to say to one's sister. Yet he might as easily have been confidential with the station agent.

Dick's arrival was a relief; though Dick was by no means an exhilarating person. He was honest and amiable, with prosaic mind and commonplace experience. But he could talk about politics, and motor-cars, and the menace of union labor, and other stock topics of casual contact. It appeared he was president of the Lyme Current Events Club. After he had promised to attend that night's meeting Strong learned too late it was a mixed organization. He knew what to expect. Masculine supe-

riority, feminine deference, and general lack of enlightenment. Being frequently deferred to did not soothe him. He had a feeling that he was posed like a zebra in a one-ring circus. Some of the men and women present were considerably his seniors, and he wondered how much of his reputation for queerness survived.

After his escape he went for a solitary walk, and the chorus of frogs, jubilant in abundant water, spoiled his cigar. They depressed him as many are depressed by the cricket's insistent shrillness. He did not sleep well that night. In unbroken stillness he missed the city's never-ending hum.

The next morning he visited the cemetery, and the post-office, and the library given by a millionaire brewer, who thus marked the splendor of his ascent. After he had inspected the Soldiers' Monument, also presented by the brewer in gracious recognition of those who gave their country blood instead of beer, there was nothing else to do. Why should he stay in a tiresome place where nobody wanted him?

His sister was astonished at the announcement that he must go, but took it placidly.

"It is n't much of a visit," she said. "Don't stay away so long again."

"I won't," he assured her.

"Maybe Christmas."

"If I can." He kissed her placid cheek.

The station agent regarded him with unabashed interest.

"Did n't stay long."

"No," admitted Strong.

"'Spose you like New York pretty well."

"Fairly well."

"Did n't bring your wife," his inquisitor persevered.

"There is n't any to bring."

The station agent looked astonished.

"Thought you was married," he said, shifting his quid.

"I was."

The agent rubbed his nose reflectively. "I never heard —"

"Gimme a ticket, Zeke," called a man impatiently, and Zeke turned reluctantly, as a dog would turn from a bone.

The engine grunted, the bell clanged, and the train began to move. It occurred to Strong that he felt more pleasure in leaving than he could possibly feel in going to any place. He recalled his departure for Cocheeco, when affectation of indifference kept him from looking back. Now he was glad to see landmarks disappearing, one by one. The visit was almost worth while for the satisfaction it afforded in getting away. He was positively elated, and astonished to find himself so. Life was good, if one really lived.

Through the sedate metropolis of New England and the anything but sedate metropolis of Rhode Island, he kept on to New York, brilliant by night

and incredibly active by day. When he dropped his bag on the floor of his chamber, he felt that an account had been satisfactorily closed.

At the office, next day, he was received with surprise.

"Another case of Mauwusset, I suppose," said Grant, with a cheerful grin. "You did n't find it as interesting as you expected."

"Something of that sort," Strong acknowledged, reddening slightly. "Will you take the rest of my vacation?"

"Sorry I can't. But I'll take you for dinner to-night."

"What's up?"

He was a little astonished, for he had never visited Grant, who lived somewhere in West End Avenue and had a wife visible in a miniature kept on his desk. Strong had a theory that social intimacy with office associates should be avoided.

"It's like this," Grant explained. "Just before you appeared, a fellow broke an engagement with me. He was to be a fourth at bridge with my wife and some people named Wells. Good sort, they are. You'll like them."

"Why are n't you the fourth?" asked Strong, sparring for time.

"Because I don't play. And I know you do. Seen you at the club. So you are elected. Call it charity, if you like. Number's 214."

"All right."

Strong felt he could not refuse without giving offense. An engagement pleaded would be a transparent lie. And a man resented diaphanous deceit, which women took as one of the prime necessities of social intercourse. Anyway, the evening would be pleasant in comparison with the night before in Lyme. Out of gratitude for deliverance, he was willing to suffer a little.

As it turned out, he did not suffer at all. For a back-slapping fellow Grant was not a bad sort. And his wife was agreeable. Wells answered his host's description, "a good sort." He taught some ology in Columbia and calm consideration of science had made him mild of manner in converse with man. Not that he was loggy. But he had the air of inviting judgment and apparent inclination to agree with the opinion last expressed. He was blond and blue-eyed, with a yellow mustache, a rather stout man of forty or thereabouts.

When Strong saw Mrs. Wells, he was reminded of a morning in the fall. Stepping from a train in the subway, his eyes lingered on a woman ahead. She was short and rather slight, with the kind of figure sometimes called "neat." And she was very straight, with a jaunty freedom of carriage. Her hat — he remembered it was blue with a single feather — completed an appearance of saucy gayety. To confirm his impression, he quickened his gait and passed her at the head of the stairs. She was unquestionably charming, and unquestionably individual. She had

chestnut hair that positively shone in the sunlight, and so did her eyes of greenish-gray, when she gave him a passing glance candid as that of a schoolboy. Tip-tilted, her nose contributed to piquant personality. From head to foot she was clean and fresh. It pleased him to find her so completely satisfactory.

Possibly because he did not expect ever to see her again, he looked a second time, pausing to light a cigarette. He saw a puppy race up to her, wagging its tail. She stooped to pat it, and it followed, tugging at her skirt. She did not seem to mind: neither did the puppy's owner, who whistled a recall, until, playfully repelled, it reluctantly returned.

Resuming his walk, Strong thought of her as a good subject for a painter, with the puppy joyously abased at her feet. He would call the picture, "Phyllis's Subject." Several times that day he remembered an agreeable vision. Then memory's dark room received the film.

Now she had returned, not as a bad penny, but a pleasant surprise. And she still satisfied fancy. She wore a light blue, and it was very becoming.

"We've met before," he said, checking Grant in a conventional presentation.

"The deuce you have!" ejaculated Grant.

"I don't remember," she said, not in the least offensively.

"It was a subway acquaintance."

"But they don't count," chimed in Grant. "I'm going to begin again."

"Not yet, please," petitioned Strong. "It was last October, a bright morning about ten o'clock. You got off a south-bound train and met a collie pup. Surely you remember the pup."

"I do remember the pup," she acknowledged; "but," with a glint of mischief, "I don't remember you."

"I was the man that stopped and looked," he suggested.

"So many men stop and look. Surely you did something more original."

"I did," he confessed. "I found out your name."

"What is it?"

"Phyllis."

"But it's Alice."

"Then you can't know about Phyllis. She's an old acquaintance of mine now. But I'm very anxious to meet Alice. If you will oblige me now, Grant."

With mock solemnity the introduction was concluded.

"Now," said Strong, "I hope you'll give me a chance to prove a case of dual identity. I think you are Phyllis without knowing it."

"I think you are mistaken. But I'm flattered to be studied. Nobody ever has studied me. Dick took me as a specimen for future examination, and I'm still pinned to the wall."

She faced Wells with a grimace, and he responded with a placid smile. They seemed on excellent terms.

Strong noted the condition as unusual. Cases of absolute devotion existed; mild affection and aversion were equally common; but genuine friendship in marriage was rare. And he was pleased to see that they had no parlor accomplishments. Nobody recited or sang, or played the piano with genteel virtuosity, or challenged comparison with Hermann in parlor tricks. The bridge they played was moderately good; the supper was excellent, and the society agreeable without mental strain. When it came to adieu, he was convinced it sometimes paid to take a chance.

"When are you coming to see us?" asked Mrs. Wells, extending her hand.

"Am I to have that privilege?"

"Of course. What a question, when you begged leave to study me. Then you did n't mean it at all." She assumed an expression of mock sorrow.

"Of course I meant it," he hastened to assure her. "But I was n't sure that you were serious. I never bank on a woman's promise unless she gives it twice."

"You don't deserve it again on the strength of that. I'll let Dick speak for me this time."

"I second it," said Wells amiably. "Will you come?"

"With pleasure." It was the only thing to say.

"But when?" She was like a teasing child.

"When you want me."

"All right. Let me see, it's Tuesday. Don't tell

me you have an engagement. You're not studying anybody else, are you?"

"Nobody," he said, capitulating with amusement. "If I have an engagement for Tuesday, or rather, if I had one, I suppose I must break it. This is duty."

"Thanks," she said. "I'm sure we are going to be great friends."

She gave him her hand with cordiality that somehow suggested the fearlessness of inexperience, and went down the steps. Wells followed, saying, "Don't forget."

Whether to forget was a question. He had decided to know no woman well. That was a large contract with reasonable expectation of many years before him. But experience had made him fearful of feminine nature, and profoundly distrustful of himself. Here was a woman he had remembered for six months, and he had merely seen her in the street. Further, she was a married woman. Still further, it was quite evident that on first acquaintance she was favorably impressed with himself. If the burnt child dreaded fire enough, he would keep away. He debated the question while smoking the night's last cigarette. And as he tossed it away, he reached Launcelot Gobbo's agreeable decision. He would go because there really was no danger. Wells and his wife understood each other perfectly. He was a good fellow, and she was a jolly little tomboy. It would be agreeable to know some people actually

satisfied with life. Most of those with whom he came in contact were either struggling for some major prize, or devoting surplus energy to feverish pleasure. There was relief in persons willing to live moderately. He was rather grateful to Grant for bringing him into touch with them. Thus disposed he fell asleep.

The next day brought a note: —

DEAR MR. SOCRATES, —

I forgot to say we live in West End Avenue. The number's 300. This takes away your last excuse for failing to appear Tuesday.

PHYLLIS.

He was amused by her naïveté. It went with her writing, a round and rambling hand. Writing interested him as an index of character. It was one of his guides in appraisal, and he had formed the habit of diagnosing personality as the physician diagnoses a case. "Phyllis," as he already called her, appeared emotionally undeveloped. Well, he would take care not to instruct her.

That Wells, a sedate fellow with a chess-player's temperament, if one could tell much by appearances, had married a hummingbird was one of the innumerable surprises of matrimony. One would expect him to partner with a serious girl, who would keep his socks mended, his buttons sewed on; see to it that he ate at proper intervals and did not go out without an umbrella on stormy days; in short, generally con-

secrete herself to the task of keeping him in a pleasant haze. He could not picture Phyllis doing that. Still, as he had noted, they seemed wholly satisfied with each other.

Number 300 interested him in its mixture of styles, with no particular style at all. It was like middle-age and youth together. There was mahogany he guessed came from Wellses of an elderly generation, and furniture that suggested Wanamaker's. Charles Dana Gibson chummed with what he took to be a little Romney. A Persian rug held itself aristocratically aloof from an "art square."

His hosts did not disguise the fact, though they did not lard him, that they regarded him as a prize. More expansive at his own table, Wells talked intelligently of architecture, which apparently interested him on its scientific side. Stimulated by approval, Strong was at his best. Once or twice it occurred to him that he was talking well.

"You're rather funny," Phyllis observed as Wells refilled his glass with a white port of which he was justly proud.

"Why?" he asked, a little piqued.

"Oh," she explained, "you seem so young sometimes, and so old other times."

"When do I seem young?" It was a novel suggestion.

"Lots of times. Like somebody trying to seem grown up. I call you 'The Boy.' Do you mind?"

"Not in the least. Possibly it will keep me from

getting more gray hairs. But if you call me 'Boy,' I shall call you 'Phyllis.'"

"Good," she said promptly. "I think nicknames are jolly. And let's christen ourselves."

Wells lifted his glass with them.

"You're a case, Peter," he said indulgently.

So she had a domestic nickname. "Peter" was somehow quite suitable. When they reached coffee she took command of the situation.

"Smoke here, Dick. I like to see men smoke, and if you take the Boy" — she hesitated prettily over the "Boy" — "off to your den, I may never see him again. You know what you're like. And anyway, you have to study some old puzzle. You said so. If you stay here now, you won't neglect your work, and I won't be left a widow."

"All right." It was quite evident that Phyllis was used to having her way. Presumably it was usually a harmless one.

"Do you like the Victor?" she asked, when cigars were comfortably aglow.

"When it is good," Strong answered. Obviously the question was directed at him.

"Ours is very good." She went through a pile of records, puckering her brows. "Tell me what you want," she said finally.

"Whatever you like," he judiciously replied.

It was about what he expected, — the barcarolle from "Tales of Hoffmann"; Elman in the "Prayer and Meditation" from "Thaïs"; Caruso pouring

out Canio's lament in "Pagliacci"; the Sextette from "Lucia," with competitive climbing for high notes; Sousa's idea of "The Stars and Stripes"; and then "rag." His mind jumped back to Mrs. Ormsby and that afternoon at Sherwin's. His face must have betrayed him, for Phyllis suddenly stopped the machine.

"You don't like ragtime," she said, a little plaintively.

"Yes, I do," he said, hastily regaining composure. "I think it is jolly."

"But you did n't look as if you did," she observed doubtfully. "Let's try something else."

To a cheerful tinkle of unfamiliar melody she tapped her feet. "Do you do the Castle Walk?"

"No," he answered. "Show it to me."

"All right. I'll have to do it alone. Dick won't do the new dances. He says they are 'rot.'"

"Not when you do them, Peter," said Wells good-humoredly.

She danced exquisitely, with the light *abandon* attributed to fairies. That she was passionately fond of it was evident. When the record was lost in a slight clacking, she started it again and held out inviting hands. Strong embraced the mute invitation. "This way," she said, and he abandoned himself to her guidance. She was a slight creature, but vital with the delicate strength of feminine youth.

"What can I do in return?" he asked, when the step went well.

"Oh, a lot," she said, breathing rapidly. "Just now you may fan me."

Wells rose, extinguishing his cigar with a scientist's precision.

"If you will excuse me," he said, "I'll finish some work I could n't quite complete this afternoon. I'm sorry to seem uncivil, but I have to use the stuff in class to-morrow morning."

"I understand," Strong assured him. "Don't mind on my account. Mrs. Wells and I will try to entertain each other."

"Run along, Dick," she said saucily. "It's going to be very formal. Did you hear him say 'Mrs. Wells'?"

He only smiled in reply. "See you as soon as possible," he said to Strong.

"Now, smoke," Phyllis commanded, when they were alone.

"Why?" he questioned, producing his cigarette-case.

"Because men are always more agreeable when they smoke."

"And some women," he hazarded. "But you don't smoke."

"I'm learning," she confessed. "I think I will now."

"Perhaps Mr. Wells objects."

She laughed at the idea. "No, Dick does n't care. He does n't mind anything I do. Please give me one."

She held it with the care of inexperience, and puckered her lips with each puff. "Is n't it cozy?" she said.

"Very." He felt as if left with a pretty child.

"Now, tell me what you like," she commanded.

"A lot of things. I don't think much of 'age before beauty.' Suppose you tell me first."

"Well," she said meditatively, "I like dogs, and children, and tennis, and dancing, and Dick."

"Is that all?"

She lifted one eyebrow comically. "And you, a little."

"Thanks from the bottom of my heart." She was quite delicious.

"Now it is your turn," she observed.

"I have n't a single enthusiasm."

"You poor thing. Let me be one."

She regarded him with mingled incredulity and concern.

"I'm afraid you'd tire of me," he said.

"We'll see about that. Now tell me something you like. There must be something you like."

"There's architecture."

She ruled it out. "That's your profession. It does n't count."

"And you, a little," he quoted.

"Of course we'll get on," she said. "I knew you were a nice boy."

She failed lamentably to blow a smoke ring, and looked depressed.

"Will you take me to a baseball game?"

"Delighted." He spoke with genuine pleasure.

"When?"

"Any time."

"Then it's to-morrow."

"You are a sudden person," he could not resist saying.

"'Never put off till day after to-morrow what you can get to-day,' — is n't that the saying?" she appealed.

"I never heard it just that way," he said diplomatically; "but I see what you mean."

"And I do so want to see the Giants," she continued, rubbing one eye into which a little smoke had drifted. "That's the only thing Dick is obstinate about. Sometimes I don't know whether he cares more about me or golf."

"I could guess," said Strong with a smile. "Now tell me what you like about dogs."

"In the first place, they don't pretend. And there are other reasons, lots of them. You see I grew up with them. Could you tell I was a country girl?"

"When I first saw you I thought you were very fresh looking," he replied.

"I know you mean that in a nice way. I was raised in Westchester, and Dick's father was my mother's first beau. You see it was quite romantic, though we don't look it."

"I don't like moony stuff, or people," he said.

"Neither do I. It's silly. But you don't want to know about me. It was the dogs you asked about."

"You and the dogs," he corrected her.

"Then the dogs come first. I'll begin with Bettina."

It appeared that Bettina was her first playmate. Then came Spark, a Boston terrier, and Bill, an Irish setter, and a few others, each remembered as affectionately as a person.

"And I have n't one now," she said pathetically. "Not a single one. Since a motor ran over Fluff, the cutest little Spitz you ever saw, last winter, I have n't had the heart to get another one."

"On your pet topic, Peter?" said Wells, who had come in unobserved.

"Of course, Dick," she answered. "I always talk about dogs to people I really like. And the Boy is nice, even if I did n't remember him before I knew him. He's going to take me to see the Giants tomorrow. Are n't you glad?"

"I had thought of a little golf," he admitted.

She laughed at his guarded admission. "Poor, patient Dick. This time you need n't worry. I've got an escort that's really interested in the game. You do like baseball, don't you?" She suddenly appealed to Strong.

"Immensely," he said.

"Then we'll go. I know it's going to be fair. And I'm sure Christy Matthewson will pitch. I like to

see him. He seems so serious, like Dick doing an example, or a minister preaching a sermon. I'll be ready. You'll find me very prompt."

"I don't believe you could be so unfeminine."

She regarded him with friendly disapproval. "That's your grown-up talk. You must n't forget, and use it with me. Dick knows I am prompt. It was your principal reason for marrying me, was n't it, Dick?"

"You know me so much better than I know myself, Peter, I would n't dream of disputing you," Wells answered with his characteristic slow smile. "I think Mr. Strong can count on your being ready in good season. But I trust you have n't bullied him into taking you. You know you are unscrupulous about baseball."

"Nothing of the sort," said Strong hastily. "I can spare the time, and I need instruction. It's quite a privilege to go with an expert."

"Now you are making fun of me," she pouted. "I really do know more than the girl who asked if all the batters were pitchers."

"I'm sure you are extremely intelligent. I must sleep hard and be fresh for to-morrow, to keep myself from being outclassed. And I'll allow you the beauty sleep you don't need, along with the rest."

"You really can make pretty speeches," she conceded as she gave him her hand.

"We're making a very good beginning," he hazarded.

"Beginning! Why, you've known me for six months."

"So I have, Phyllis. Good-night."

"Good-night, Boy. Don't be late."

Wells beamed with ripe maturity's indulgence for youth.

It was one of the nights with which, even in the city, nature's creative fervor is felt. Mysterious whispers in the park trees, and the very grass seems audible in delicate murmur. Strong could not recall when he had felt so young and so friendly with all creation. He was not inclined to sleep. He let his feet go when he found he had rounded a corner in the direction of the club.

The reading-room was quite empty. That is to say, it had no occupant besides Sammy White, who greeted all men with indiscriminate affability after ten o'clock at night. As usual, he was skimming cable news for personals. Though he no longer appeared "among those present," his principal interest was in trailing deaths and marriages, and the departures, via scandal or Wall Street, from society. Presently he rustled his paper, which was his prelude to announcement of a tid-bit.

"Won't you have something?" he inquired, keeping a finger on his discovery.

"No, thank you," said Strong, emerging from that condition in which one is agreeably conscious of not thinking at all.

"Did n't you know Mrs. Ormsby?"

"What Mrs. Ormsby?"

Strong parried instinctively. The question was like a chilling blast. And why the past tense?

"Why, Mrs. Charlie Ormsby." Sammy enjoyed prolonging announcement of his discovery.

"Yes, I know her. What about her?"

By lighting a cigarette he avoided expression of concern.

"She's dead, that's all."

"How did it happen?"

He clenched his hands in the effort to show moderate interest, and no more.

"They don't seem to know. It was in Paris," explained Sammy. He was evidently disappointed in the effect of his news. "Want to see the paper?"

"Thanks," said Strong, taking the sheet extended.

He read the dispatch, a paragraph under Paris date line. The heading was, — "NEW YORK SOCIETY WOMAN FOUND DEAD." Then followed the curt statement: "Mrs. Charlie Ormsby, of New York, widow of the well-known amateur jockey whose neck was broken in a steeplechase some years ago, and herself identified with the Hollowbrook Hunt set, was found dead, this morning, in her apartment in the Hotel Ritz. She was in bed, with an empty chloral bottle by her side. How much of the drug had been taken, and whether she had used it for medicinal purposes, remain to be discovered. The American embassy has interested itself in the case."

"She was looking very well the last time I saw her," he observed, returning the paper.

"Simply rippin', last time I saw her," Sammy agreed. "That was at the Horse Show. She was with Ollie Damerel. You had n't seen her lately?"

"Don't remember just when. Some months ago, in the winter time. At the opera, I think it was, and she was with Ollie Damerel then."

"Ollie was sweet on her, I always thought," said Sammy sagely. "But she never cared much about Ormsby, or any other man. One of those women that take us as a joke, you know. 'T was n't love she died of, anyway. Sure you won't take a night-cap?"

"I don't think so. I ought to write a letter before I turn in." He rose as he spoke.

"All right. Be careful of your looks while you have any to save."

Sammy was already running his finger down the London paragraphs. But Strong felt him as an unconsciously accusing presence, even when he had reached the street. He asked himself a question, "Was it suicide?" He could not answer. And he felt sure nobody would be able to answer. If she had died by choice, she had left it hidden. She was not the kind of woman who begs for sympathy, living or dead. He saw her again, smiling as she did the last time. That was after she said, "It is hard for a woman to be left bankrupt in heart and body." She was very fond of him. He would not belittle

her by thinking otherwise. Neither could he flatter himself to the extent of supposing that any woman would die because he did not love her. He knew himself too well for that. Being neither very good, nor very handsome, nor brave and brilliant at all, he was nothing to go mad over. Any man, of course, could make some woman love him, and sometimes he did n't have to try. It had just happened that way with himself. He promised himself it should never happen again.

What of Phyllis Wells? He had not proposed to cross-examine himself about her again. That was settled. She was only a child at heart, despite her wedding ring; and her disposition toward him was no more to be mistrusted than intentions of a squirrel that eats gayly from a friendly hand. For his part, he would not fall in love with her. He could guarantee that. He had never fallen in love with anybody. There was friendship, real friendship with a woman; something more precious and rare than friendship with man. Why poke it with prying fingers?

He was impatient with himself for morbid introspection. He was reminded of Dorian Gray, creeping upstairs to the locked room that had a mirror in front of the portrait Basil Hallward had painted of him, looking now at the evil and ageing face on the canvas, and now on the fresh young face that laughed back at him from the glass. Gray's favorite pastime had been examination of the corruption of

his own soul. It was possible to create evil by imagining it. Should he throw away the most healthful influence that had ever come to him for a neurasthenic notion?

He went to the baseball game, next day, with unreserved enjoyment. So did Phyllis, very *chic* in gray.

"A good match for your eyes," he said with a nod of approval.

"Do you notice clothes?" She was manifestly pleased.

"Of course. Any man does."

She smiled reminiscently. "Dick does n't. He could n't tell, if you telephoned him now, what I wore when I lunched with him to-day."

"You bewilder him by the *ensemble*," he suggested.

"Don't begin compliments." She tapped him playfully. "Does Matthewson pitch?"

"I believe he does."

"Bully!" She said it charmingly. "I'm going to fall in love with him, if I ever want to feel romantic."

"Why go so far?"

"Well, he seems so steady and strong; so sure of himself. I just feel he can't lose. And the players feel it, too. Then, he's a great man. Even the umpire dare n't be cross with him."

"That's logical enough," he allowed. "I wonder if you're as well grounded on points of the game."

To his astonishment, she was. He felt her reflected enthusiasm when the shortstop, with one ear almost

touching the ground, shot the ball across to catch the runner at first. And she was piquantly incensed when a fielder fumbled, or a batter struck out with men on bases. As much as any unshaven occupant of the bleachers she was a "fan."

"Are you going to take me again?" she asked as they were swept out of the Polo grounds in the hurrying crowd.

"If I may," he answered promptly. "It's been great fun."

"Then don't come home with me. Just put me on a car. We'll be like relatives."

"Have you a nickel in your purse?" he inquired. A car not crowded to the steps was approaching.

"How funny you are. You talk like a husband."

"They say poor lovers make good husbands," he remarked carelessly, "but good husbands are apt to be poor lovers."

She looked a little puzzled. "Sometimes I don't understand what you mean."

"Sometimes I don't understand what I mean myself. And I suspect a good many times I don't mean anything."

"Don't mind," she said pityingly. "I like to guess. Thank you ever so much. Telephone me to-morrow, if you get a chance."

Before he had time to reply the car was under way. As he waited for his own car he revolved with mildly affectionate amusement some little episodes of the afternoon. She was the frankest and most honest

woman he had ever met. It seemed hardly possible to live, say twenty-five years, — she must be as old as that, — and have absolutely no veneer. He must be more careful in what he said to her. She took pleasantries as literally as a child. What did she want to tell him by telephone? From any other woman such a request on second meeting would look like leading on. But Phyllis —! He laughed at the idea.

As to telephoning, he was doubtful. It looked different next day. There was nothing to telephone about. Probably she did not expect it. Remarks bridging the step of boarding a street-car should never be taken seriously. These reflections came to him from time to time in the morning. By noon he had decided that, merely for appearance's sake, to telephone would be unwise. When he was ready to go in the afternoon it occurred to him that she was probably out, at some *matinée* or shopping. It would do no harm to comply with her request.

No maid answered his "Hullo!" It was unquestionably Phyllis's voice, sounding a little hurt.

"Why did n't you call before? Did n't you want to speak to me?"

"Of course," he said, and fell back on a venerable excuse: "I have been busy all day."

He heard her laugh, not quite a giggle.

"Fraud!" she admonished with mock severity. "That's what Dick always says when he forgets to bring me some chocolates."

"I can't show you how well I remember," he responded in proper vein, though somewhat uncomfortable because Grant's desk was near and Grant himself was staring into space with the far-away look that often betokens close listening.

"I wonder," she said, after a brief pause, "if it would be cheeky for me to ask another favor of you?"

"I'm sure it would n't," he assured her.

"Of course you can say 'No,' if it is the least bit inconvenient."

"But I don't want to say 'No.' What is it?"

"Will you take me to the Hollowbrook Steeplechase, next Friday? I've asked Dick, and he has a horrid lecture. And I do want to go. Next to dogs, I love horses. Could you?"

"I can, and will. But you're doing me the favor."

"You're a duck." Over the wire he could feel her elation. "Did you like the game?"

"It was the best one I ever attended."

Again she laughed. "It sounds like spoons. Friday, then, and I'll be very prompt. Good-bye."

When he turned from the telephone, Grant was figuring industriously. As he finished a column he put down his pen and leaned back with a yawn.

"Have a good time at Wells's, the other night?"

"First-rate," said Strong with unnecessary heartiness, and wondered at the question, as Grant yawned again and took up his pen.

Then he was impatient with himself for thinking the inquiry could mean anything in particular.

Having dictated a letter to postpone a business engagement for Friday, he departed in good humor. Though he regarded the *bouttonnière* as an affectation, he bought a pink of the lame girl who sold flowers by the street entrance, and wore it in his buttonhole. And after dinner he took Sammy White for a bridge partner. Sammy's game was the worst in the club with one exception, — a man so saturated with poker that he persisted in calling for three cards and feeling about for chips. But the race is not always to the swift, nor a fistful of trumps to men of large understanding. Sammy won because he could not lose, and Strong accompanied him to victory. That was very agreeable. It is doubly pleasant to be materially rewarded for an act of self-sacrifice. Strong went his way pondering some fellow's saying about getting in return what we give. Anyway, getting into the game gave one a feeling of companionship. He had been a little offish all his life.

Nature smiled upon the Hollowbrook Steeplechase. It was a beautiful sight on a sunny afternoon, with the emerald turf as yet untouched by summer heat; the grandstand mass of multi-colored millinery that shaded into purple at a distance; the drags, spots of brilliant color about the track; gay-coated jockeys and the horses they rode, proud creatures satin-skinned. There was more high-breeding under the saddle than under plumed hats.

The band blared, the belles paraded, and men in

neckcloths and riding-boots strode about with a professional air. The Steeplechase was reserved till last, for the reason that led the Romans to keep gladiators and lions for a closing feature. Usually, somebody was hurt, and sometimes a jockey was killed. The crowd was thickest at the water jump, the great hazard. Nobody wanted to see anybody killed, but if it happened, everybody, apparently, preferred to be present. Not that they reasoned thus. Particularly the women, who craned their necks, quite unconscious of being jostled as they watched each flying horse lifted to the brush barrier with a ditch beyond, would have warmly resented any insinuation of bloodthirstiness. But each successful jump was followed by a collective sigh. At length patience was rewarded. A hoof ticked the barrier and a horse jumped short, failed to clear the ditch and went down, though it convulsively struggled to firm ground. The jockey lay motionless. There was a stir in the crowd. Willing hands improvised a stretcher, and the horse was led away, its head drooping, dragging an almost useless leg. Now a question was on everybody's lips, — "Who won?"

The crowd streamed to right and left, and in a momentary jam Strong saw Damerel at his elbow. Wearing his habitual expression of honest good humor, he was piloting a lady with clamorous clothes. He merely nodded, and said with a turn of his head, "Tough about Virginia, was n't it?"

"Yes," answered Strong with surpassing brevity, and strangers came between.

"What's 'tough' about Virginia?" Phyllis inquired when they had elbow-room.

"She's dead," he explained laconically.

"She was a friend of yours?" Her manner was slightly timid.

"Yes, I knew her very well."

"I'm sorry," she said simply.

It was as expressive as the condolence of a child. He felt it gratefully, for there was no covert curiosity, no unexpressed expectation of confidence. With no rift in harmony between them, they were borne away through the glory of sunset after a May day.

"Such a beautiful time," said Phyllis with a little sigh. "I hate to go home."

"Why?" said Strong idly.

"Because I have to eat alone."

"Why?" he repeated.

"Because Dick is away. This morning I told him I did n't mind. Now it makes me lonesome to think of it."

Her tone was slightly forlorn, and he spoke impulsively.

"Would you like to dine with me?"

"Would I!"

She was instantly animated. Then her face fell, and she said self-denyingly, "But I must n't take so much of your time."

"I'd like to have you take more," he insisted warmly. "Really, I beg to be used. That is, if you are sure Dick won't mind."

"Oh, he'll be grateful," she said confidently.

"You might telephone?"

"But I don't know the place. He does n't expect to hear from me."

"In that case," he considered, "we must save each other. Where shall it be?"

"Oh, anywhere." Such trust imposed heavy responsibility.

"Sherry's?" he suggested.

"If you like it," she agreed. "Is that the New Yorkiest place in town?"

"It's the most abandoned adventure of Knickerbocker dowagers; but the cooking is tremendously good."

"I don't care so much for just food," she reflected. "Do you know places that are n't terribly respectable?"

"A few," he admitted.

"I think I should like one."

"Let's see," he reflected. "If you were a very bright — of course you are that — and sophisticated lady, I would take you to Max's. But you don't care to see the hand that wrote last month's best-seller, and hear Signor Bombaste's opinion of himself as Don José. We might go to the Stark Avenue, if you don't mind navy people who talk mostly about places they have visited. It has a sunken

Spanish *patio* that is charming on a warm night. What do you say to the Stark?"

"I'd like any place you like. You choose," she said, with a pretty air of dependence.

He saw her anew. The sparkling sparrow was changed into a wren. Protective instinct long dormant touched him to tenderness like nothing experienced before. He did not analyze his feeling. He only thought of her as young and simple and sweet, a charmingly natural little girl. It was his privilege to entertain her, and he was happy in doing so.

They came uptown in the subway. Phyllis insisted upon it.

"I don't know why," she hazarded, "but tonight I like to be with people."

"That is n't much of a compliment for me," he said banteringly.

"Oh, yes, it is," she protested. "It's because you are here that I like the others."

"Who said 'spoons' the other day?" he asked teasingly.

A deeper pink came to her cheek, and she looked a bit troubled.

"That was just fun," she said.

"I know that," he assured her. "You must n't mind anything I say. I'm the 'Boy,' and boys always make tactless remarks. What do you think of the man just opposite us?"

"He's awfully funny. Somehow he reminds me of Uriah Heep."

"He's a minister," said Strong positively.

"How do you know?" She was mischievously alert now. "He has n't any minister's clothes."

"Not on. But see how he holds his forefingers together: that's the habit of prayer. And his eyes have a habit of rolling up a bit: that's the habit of prayer too. And he has a look of professional piety."

"He looks to me like the cat that has just swallowed the canary. But I must n't be mean."

"You are n't. You're only observant. Don't we live to dissect, and be dissected?"

"That's being clever." Her tone was slightly reproachful.

"Oh, no, it is n't. It's only being talkative. Then, what do you think of that young limb of a terrier, chewing his mistress's skirt over there?"

"He's a dear. I could hug him."

"Lucky dog," he said meditatively.

She regarded him with perplexity.

"You are n't going to be different, are you?"

"Yes," he answered, "I'm going to be different this minute. 'Park Avenue! All out.' Come along, Child. I'll race you up the stairs."

"Is n't this fun," she said pantingly, when he had barely beaten her at the top. "I feel as if I were in a real adventure."

"So do I," he agreed.

Pleasant excitement possessed him. It was as new wine to the palate. With his feeling of proprietary

tenderness he was like a fresh-cheeked schoolboy, only more articulate than a juvenile knight. A little self-conscious, he smiled at himself in wondering what Sammy White or some other club acquaintance would say, could they behold him playing the squire with Phyllis. It was a pleasant surprise to himself that he so much enjoyed it.

"A penny for your thoughts."

"They are n't worth it."

He came back to active observation of Phyllis. She was giving him and an almond impartial attention.

"Still, I'd like to know," she persisted.

"The fact is, I was n't thinking of anything at all."

She took another almond, and regarded him judicially. "Are you much of a bluff?"

"The most persistent," he confessed with alacrity.

"But not with me, Boy."

"No, Phyllis. Not with you."

"I'm glad," she said, with a sigh of content. "It would spoil everything."

Her hand on the table was temptingly near, and he covered it with his own, gently. She did not move, nor did her eyes waver. Only the pink deepened on her cheek. Behind them the waiter coughed apologetically, and Strong released her fingers. There was no word of explanation, but from that moment dated closer understanding. Thought of entertainment and sense of duty in attention departed. They

talked casually, easily, with restful pauses. The place itself was restful, one of the few left for diners not confusing nervous irritation with entertainment.

There was no turkey trot, no one-step, no maxixe. No youth with educated legs or matron minus discretion competed for applause in eccentric gyrations. At an agreeable distance a band played softly behind a bank of green. Foliage skillfully massed suggested a restaurant in some forest glade. The stars of a blue-black sky were friendly, for they were not defied by brazen lights. In vast reaches of the city pillars of brightness emphasized dark gulfs, and wavering projections of smoky red suggested great fingers pointed heavenward.

In the distance a clock struck nine with heavy strokes.

"I hate to go, but I suppose we must," said Strong.

"I suppose we must," echoed Phyllis regretfully. Their meditative mood lingered. The charm of an occasion was still upon them as a spell. They reached the street, the house, and it was dark, save for a reflected hall light and a dim light in an upper story.

"Dick's not home yet," Phyllis said, her hand on the door.

"Too bad we're cheated. Here's your key."

His voice was suddenly bereft of warmth.

"Yes, I'm sorry."

She laid her hand on his arm, and he felt her sympathy. How it happened he could not tell. But he took her in his arms. For a moment he held her, so slight and tender. Then slowly his arms dropped, and she stood free. She had not struggled at all. Through a stained-glass panel light came dimly. It was enough to reveal her look of apprehensive wonder. There was no anger, only the expression of one dazed by sudden shock.

"Oh, Boy! How could you?"

"I'm sorry," he said. "Forgive me."

How his petition was answered he did not wait to learn. He went blindly down the steps and up the street. His brain ran wild. Suddenly he was dimly conscious of some one barring the way. Chaos was penetrated by Wells's mildly genial voice.

"You're exceeding the speed limit. Won't you come back with me for a smoke?"

"No, thanks." With a wrench Strong summoned energy for a conventional pose. "I've just left Mrs. Wells at home," he added; then supplemented his statement again out of self-consciousness, "We were late back to town, and she was kind enough to dine with me at the Stark Avenue. Very good place, don't you think?"

"I used to go there, but I guess it was new to Mrs. Wells. Thanks for saving her from a dull evening. Good day at the races?"

"Very fair. Hardly enough accidents to suit the crowd, though."

Wells smiled. "Same old mob spirit," he said. "Sure you won't come in for a cigar?"

"I'd like to, but I can't. Promised to be at the club by ten."

"All right. Drop in soon."

The shock of encounter steadied Strong like a cold plunge. It clarified thought, and he was sick at heart. Once in Paris he had seen a bearded brute hectoring a slip of a girl, and he had never forgotten the misery of her eyes so expressive of defilement. Now he himself was guilty of a kindred crime. If he was not guilty of a physical offense, he had still violated a shrine. And he had no defense against indictment at the bar of conscience. There was not even the legendary excuse of Adam: "The woman tempted me." The woman had not tempted him.

In previous adventures of the heart he had never viewed himself as a predatory male. But he had changed. He saw himself as a sensualist, and a cold sensualist, the worst type.

Despite early admiration for Omar, he had always been temperate in liquor. Now it did not occur to him to drown his misery in drink. He accepted with indifference the "Imperial" cocktail urged upon him by a hospitable acquaintance at the club.

"What's in it?" he inquired, when the contents of a tall glass had touched his flesh with fire.

"Brandy, and champagne," said the sponsor carelessly. "Nothing better for a peckish feeling. Better

have another. You looked rotten when you came in."

Prudence struggled with unexpected relief. He felt no sorrow, not even any responsibility. Conversation about was very pleasant, though sometimes a little indistinct. He took it in by snatches, piecing out meaning. But that was rather laborious. It was more agreeable to rest in music that he heard, very syncopated stuff, much like the banging and piping that accompanied dancing girls in Chicago's famed "Midway Plaisance."

It would be mere politeness to drink once more with the benefactor who had introduced him to a sovereign concoction. Presently tall glasses of sparkling amber in which ice clinked pleasantly stood before them. With "Here's how!" in chorus reason accelerated its little heeded retreat.

The music continued. It was like the sound of water now, a mighty melodious roaring. Strong tried to make out the key, but gave it up because the wall interested him more. It was waving to and fro like a great fan, and all the pictures went with it. The oscillation became more pronounced. Now the pictures swung out from the wall, as it came nearer and nearer. He wanted to escape, but could not move. With a movement more violent than any that preceded it, it hung over him. This time he knew it would fall. His ears were shocked by a terrific crash.

CHAPTER XIV

WHEN Strong recovered consciousness he was in a strange room. He did not grasp details at once. There was water beside him, and he drank greedily. It seemed as if he could never get enough. Slowly and painfully, loathing the task, his mind toiled over incidents of the night before. For the time being his collapse in drunkenness absorbed him. Symptoms of the body excluded troubles of the mind. There were pick-ups he had never needed. Club servants would know about them. But he was slow in summoning resolution to press a button within reach. Any exertion seemed too much.

The boy who answered his call looked disgustingly healthy. His manner, however, was irreproachably respectful.

Strong capitulated to necessity.

"Bring me the usual thing," he said.

"Yes, sir," the boy answered. He seemed nowise astonished.

Presently he reappeared to mix something white and foamy.

"I think you'll feel better soon, sir," he said; then added, with a bedside manner, "It's a fine morning."

"Is it? I hope so."

Strong was too wretched to care for coherence.

The forecast was right. After a time came a sensation of comparative stability, if not of peace. To rise seemed possible. And he managed a bath. Each step was a victory against heavy odds. They decreased, however, so that he entertained the thought of labor. Though he did little, or nothing, it seemed that being present in the office would somehow minify his indiscretion. Looking at it afterwards, he did not feel certain it was an indiscretion.

By no means proud of somewhat way-worn appearance, he heard no comment upon it, save Grant's jocose insinuation: —

"You take the races too hard, old man."

"It is quite a strain," he answered, with a pale smile.

It was not architecture that he thought of, as he sat in apparent inspection of specimens in Gothic style. Phyllis came before him with the grieved look that he last saw. And because he had lost her he recalled other and happy occasions with heightened effect. The first day he remembered as if it were yesterday. She was the incarnation of eternal youth. And that evening at Grant's she fulfilled a stranger's promise. Always she had been charming without coquetry, as honest as daylight. For his presumption there was no excuse. He had closed the door behind himself.

He felt old. But his melancholia was not acute.

Physical disturbance and a period of unconsciousness had broken the first shock. Work he remembered as a panacea, and he invoked it again. He tore a leaf from his calendar with bitter satisfaction. Thursday was done. He ached with weariness and desired only to sleep. Friday it was the same. Saturday she called him. It was so unexpected, he was off his guard when her voice came over the wire, after the formal preliminary of the summoned, "Hullo!"

"Are n't you afraid of the 'S.P.C.A.'?"

"You're not an animal," he managed to say.

"Why have n't you called?"

"I've worked very hard since I saw you." It was possible to be literally truthful.

"Then, why did n't you telephone?"

"I did n't think you wanted me to."

"Why not?"

Long-range frankness was becoming too difficult.

"Don't you know?" he answered.

"No. What is it?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you now."

"Then come and tell me."

"I don't think I'd better."

"Have I done anything to deserve being treated like this?"

The note of hurt pride was unmistakable.

"No, you have n't done anything." He wanted to explain a measure of what he felt, but could not

bring himself to do it. It seemed to him that the telephone had both eyes and ears, and a capacity for gossip.

"Then I shall expect to see you. This afternoon is a good time. Can you come at four?"

"Yes," he answered. "Good-bye."

He had been despondent. Now he was confused. When one had looked upon a tie as past, it was startling to find it referred to as living without need of burial clothes. Still, he dreaded to go. After what had happened, their relations could never be the same again. There would be caution on one side and distrust on the other. The best he could do would be to offer frank apology and put an end to intimacy. But probably that would not be necessary. She had had a lesson, too.

His doubt increased as he neared her house and rang the bell. How would she receive him? There was no constraint in her manner, nor trace of grief in her face. With familiar directness she advanced, and he took her extended hand.

"Now, what is it?" she asked.

"Why, my behavior, the other night."

He was driven to bluntness by her pointed inquiry.

"That was mostly my fault, and, anyway, it was n't so dreadful. We just won't do it again, will we?"

"But it was n't your fault. It was all mine, and I was too ashamed to face you again."

"You must n't abuse yourself. It is n't nice. We'll just forget we were foolish. Shall we?"

"Can you?"

"Of course. Now that's settled, we can be comfortable. The last two days have been horrid. You've had a hard time, too, poor Boy. Sit here and smoke, and I'll show my newest accomplishment. I can blow smoke through my nose."

"Can you?" he said, trying to hide the fact that he was a little dazed.

For what had he abased himself in bitter humiliation? The lily he had soiled was unconscious of the mark. Did the mark, then, exist? What he had felt for her was real. What he thought she had felt for him was imaginary. Of her native purity he had no doubt. Simply, she was even less sophisticated than he had supposed. She liked him as a companion, but had no fondness for him as a man. It was not really a woman's regard she gave him.

Such reflections came to him as he smoked and talked, his mind disengaged in casual banter. He saw Phyllis as a Dresden figure, lightly animated. He was relieved, of course, to find no harm had been done. He told himself that. What he did not make clear to himself was the nature of feeling bordering chagrin. When one has fancied himself a flaming torch of destruction, it is not pure satisfaction to realize he has been no more dangerous than a toy balloon.

Strong's friendship with Phyllis continued un-

clouded. She had no definite standards, no philosophy. She was as Wells had found her, a blank page. In writing therein Strong sought to supply what he himself lacked, a coherent vision of life. It could not be said that Phyllis was keenly receptive. There was in her something of the incorrigible kitten.

Nickeled steel cannot become a Damascus blade. Naïveté palls in the long run. The first time he wriggled out of an engagement with Phyllis, Strong imagined he was not in a mood to be agreeable company. The next time he knew he did not want to go.

He was a somewhat contradictory person of nervous temperament and leisurely mind. Phyllis's vivacity was like the incessant chattering of a sparrow. Sometimes he felt like applying a gag. Then he turned remorseful, she was so genuinely amiable, so eager to please.

In their meeting Grant had been the agent of what once resembled Providence. Now he entered again, an unwitting factor. He was a man who found it difficult to hold a piece of news.

"Seen much of the Wellses lately?" he asked with elaborate carelessness, as he consulted with Strong over a plan.

"Quite a bit." This time Strong's indifference was real.

"I suppose they're feeling pretty happy now-a-days," Grant pursued.

"Happy enough, I guess. Is there any special reason for jubilation?"

Grant lighted a cigarette as an aid to moderation.

"Don't you know?"

"No, I don't know. What is it?"

He was a little amused by Grant's poorly disguised impatience to tell.

"Come to think of it, I don't suppose you would know. It's a little early. Phyllis told my wife."

"Phyllis told your wife what?"

He could not understand Grant's beating about the bush.

"You're a little dense, old man, not to get it now. What I mean is that they're expecting a youngster, of course."

"Is that all? I thought you had something sensational up your sleeve." Strong mentally clocked his pulse, and found it normal. "It will be a good thing for Phyllis," he said judicially. "She needs something to steady her."

"That's right," agreed Grant. He seemed to lose interest in the subject. It was not mentioned again.

Strong reflected at leisure. The thought of maternity for Phyllis had not shocked him, but the prospect wrought a change of view. It made her physically remote, and tangibly the complement of another man. For the first time he really saw her as Wells's wife. And he did not view her with longing. That was past. What he thought was there should be no bar to close communion between husband and wife.

When one has ceased to care it matters little upon what peg an excuse is hung.

He went to see her that afternoon. Turning the familiar corner, his spirits rose. It was the last time. He awaited her in the library, hat in hand. Whistling, she descended the stairs, with a light clatter of heels in crossing the hall. She began conversation at long range.

"I'm so glad you came. It's been terribly pokey. I did want to see somebody. Why, you don't look as if you meant to stay."

"I can't," he said. "I've just dropped in to say good-bye."

"What a surprise! Where are you going?"

"Europe. It's a surprise to me, too."

"When?" she questioned. Astonishment robbed her of volubility.

"To-morrow," he explained. "And I must pack, and get a stateroom, and do heaps of things."

"Will you be gone long?"

"Can't tell just how long. I have to see about my brother. He's ill in Hamburg."

On the spur of the moment he improvised with gratifying fluency.

"I'm sorry. But you'll write, won't you?"

"I'll try. I'm a shocking correspondent, though. Only wrote to my mother once in four years."

"Well," she said, a bit flurried by something she could not understand, "I hope you'll do better than that with me."

"Do my best. Sorry I have n't time to see Dick. Give him my best wishes. I'll send you a string of beads, or a Madonna and child, or something of the sort. Good-bye."

"Good luck," she said, and blushed slightly.

Perhaps his allusion to the Madonna and child was not quite delicate. But that did not worry him as he strode briskly away. He had come through the encounter, if it might be called an encounter when the issue of severance was understood by only one side, quite jauntily. Why not go to Europe? He had not crossed since his adventure with Mrs. Follinsbee. There would be nothing of that sort again. He had been vaccinated. He was immune. Then where to? His fancy lighted upon Holland. It was late for the tulips, those beds of ordered brilliance he had never seen. But the Dutch were there, the most self-contained people of Europe, with their quaintly clean villages fended from the sea. The sailing-list announced a boat for Rotterdam at nine in the morning. When he had pocketed his ticket and sent a note to the office he felt he was almost on the way. As he packed, he whistled riotously. The janitor's wife, hovering about with motherly inquisitiveness, was moved to comment.

"It's good news ye must have had, Mr. Strong."

"That's right, Mary. I brought it to myself."

"It's a great joker ye are. Do you really mean that's for Pat?" catching a shirt carelessly tossed.

"Sure, he'll be that grateful."

Strong went to sleep that night with a consciousness of peace that was novel and very precious. And when the Hedwig poked her nose into the Bay, next morning, he paced her deck with positive buoyancy. He felt like a man who has feared an operation and suddenly learns he has no need of the knife.

CHAPTER XV

WOMAN has her "dangerous age," and some men feel the quicksands of forty. Strong approached twoscore with confidence that for himself life's emotional adventures were done. To be sure, he sometimes paused in the street, momentarily obedient to the witchery of a face, and sometimes at the opera he felt lonely, as if he were on the very fringe of existence, when other men gave protective care to woman-kind. But that, he assured himself, was only proper respect for the sex. He was no more a "woman hater" than a "ladies' man." So gradually it was accomplished, before he fully realized it, he drifted into the habits of a man whose interests are centered in work and club. More and more the profession for which he had felt no enthusiasm at first absorbed his energies. He was one of a firm that in the city's monuments had made its creditable mark. He had pride in sustaining its prestige.

Nearing middle age, the unattached man is apt to be either a butterfly or a grub. Strong was neither. But now the club rather than the drawing-room was familiar ground. When he ventured forth socially, it was usually to dine with some friend who had married and pinned his great hope to posterity. Viewing their children, he reasonably thought it

would brighten life to have such an interest. But he never really regretted his lot.

With Mrs. Decrow, who had passed the Scriptural allotment without much impairment of vivacity, he was still on excellent terms. She encouraged him to think of old age as possibly happy. Then she was one of the few women of his close acquaintance not infected with a matchmaking propensity. That she remembered his marriage and had not forgotten Eleanor, he felt sure when stray thoughts of old days connected her with his one highly crucial experience. But she had referred to that chapter only once in years. It was across her tea-table, and after a comfortable pause.

"I wonder, Waldo, if you would allow an inquisitive old woman a question."

"I'd allow it to you," he promptly assured her.

"Why have you remained single all these years?"

She came to the point with habitual directness. And he answered with equal frankness.

"Because I have n't wanted to marry anybody."

"It is n't on account of Eleanor, then?"

"No."

The explanation seemed inadequate, but it was a bit difficult to amplify it. "Not that she was n't worth it," he said presently. "You know that."

"If anybody is. The best of us would not keep a man tied to a ghost. And Eleanor was one of the best. I'm sure she would n't wish it."

"She has n't tied me," he again assured her. "I

have n't wanted to marry, that's all. Probably I never will."

"Perhaps," she said briskly, "but not 'probably.' There are born old maids, but I never saw a natural bachelor."

"I'm ready for the arrow," he smiled.

He did not suspect it would strike him soon.

It happened at Kinteco, which is one of the picturesquely beautiful places of the White Mountains. It could not be called a "spot," for there are seven mountains encircling a broad upland, and they are diversified in charm at once remote and friendly. Their treasures of spruce and pine have thus far escaped the lumberman, save for a patch that looks like a great shingle in the distance, an opening wedge on Pauguk, that mountain with a bald crown affording the most comprehensive view in New England. The air is bracing and the trout fishing is very good. The latter consideration had more weight in Strong's decision to spend a holiday in Kinteco than its lauded scenery, or the society of the Prescotts, who urged it upon him. He was just then professionally associated with Prescott, a nice fellow with a passion for book-plates. Mrs. Prescott had a quiet hobby in Persian rugs.

Kinteco was not a village. It was a summer hotel, with the nearest native community five miles away. Had Strong appreciated that fact in advance, he would have stayed away. "The white light that beats upon a throne" is no more glaring than atten-

tion bestowed upon the eligible male in a summer depository of predatory women. One backed by the baptism of experience understands no compliment is necessarily involved. That was why Strong did not welcome an introduction to Mrs. Bradley, the evening he arrived. Mrs. Prescott suggested he would find her agreeable, adding that she was "very nice."

"You know I'm not lonesome," he said defensively.

"But you can't spend all your time alone," she said, "and men are scarce, and, of course, Harry and I are no change for you. I don't want to drag you, though. I'm only suggesting it because Lisle is the sort of woman you like. I knew her in school."

"Is she as unusual as her name?"

"Yes, indeed. She won't expect you to amuse her, and she won't flirt."

He smiled at her earnestness. "The woman who is n't dangerous is apt to be dull. Still, you excite my curiosity. Will you be kind enough to present me?"

She led him by knots of summer girls surrounding the summer youth, and the stout and elderly, who rested in estuaries of the current of promenaders. "Oh, here is Lisle," said Mrs. Prescott, halting suddenly by a woman sitting alone. She was watching the rising of the moon, a disc of silver above the flank of Pauguk, and did not turn immediately on hearing her name.

"Good-evening, Edith," she said, her eyes still on a line of forest the moon defined sharply against the sky.

"I'd like to present a friend," Mrs. Prescott remarked, as if asserting man's claim against that of nature.

Then she half-turned in her chair, and he saw her face. Moonlight transfigures, but he gathered an impression of unusual personality in the quick estimate of a first look. She appeared quite tall and slight, and there was unassertive dignity in the carriage of her head. Her abundant hair was seemingly black. It made her look paler than she was in the uncertain light, but evidently she had not much color. Her features were delicate and sharply chiseled. He could see her nose was pure Grecian, and he felt sure her eyes were dark brown. All this was not grasped at once, but unobtrusively noted in the preliminaries of introduction. They also revealed a voice low and well modulated. It would never gush. It held a note of reserve.

Mrs. Prescott did not linger. "I must find Harry," she said presently. "No, Mr. Strong," as he rose to escort her, "I'll get on nicely alone. You stay and amuse Mrs. Bradley."

"Do you mind if I smoke?" he asked when Mrs. Prescott's last footfall was lost in silence.

"Please do."

She did not say she liked to see men smoke, or that she envied them the privilege. With her chin in the

palm of her hand, she kept her eyes on the crescent moon, lightening as it rose the gold of the stars. Her manner was not distant, but he sensed a veil of musing between them. With intent to destroy it he ventured a banal remark.

"I think Mrs. Prescott was right."

"About what?"

"She said you were an unusual woman."

"I fear Edith is over-enthusiastic," she said. "Do you see how that tall pine stands out, with its two great branches, like a giant leading an army?"

"It is a striking suggestion," he admitted, thinking her indifferent. "You don't seem eager to hear about your unusualness."

"Do you think you have known me long enough to pass judgment?"

She gave him undivided attention now, and he saw about her mouth a hint of a smile.

"I usually rely on first opinions," he said defensively.

"And you never make a mistake?"

"Sometimes, of course. But people are not necessarily complete puzzles. I feel sure, for instance, of one unusual quality in you."

"What is it?" she asked quietly.

"Repose."

"We may all learn that by experience."

She volunteered no confidence, but he suddenly drew a connection between black she wore and the wedding ring alone on her finger.

"I did n't mean to conduct a catechism. Let's talk of something more interesting than ourselves."

He felt he had been guilty of juvenile presumption, and exerted himself to efface a bad impression. It was easy to talk with Mrs. Bradley. If she showed no sign of brilliance, she exhibited receptive intelligence. She had the art of listening that does not hurry the narrator to mental bankruptcy. Strong rose from a lengthy chat mentally refreshed.

"Are you staying through with the Prescotts?" she asked, as they parted at the foot of the stairs.

"I think so," he replied.

"Then we shall have other talks. Good-night."

As she ascended he noted her assured grace of carriage. And their moment at the foot of the stairs had disclosed the quality of her eyes. They were deep brown and softly lustrous. It occurred to him they were as curtains to a chamber. The piazza was quiet now and well-nigh deserted. As he paced it awhile, with his cigar and the moon he felt himself well companioned.

He had planned an all-day fishing trip for the morrow, but his interest flagged before noon. It was not the fault of the trout. They were present in numbers, and maneuvered with all the ingenuity a reasonable fisherman could expect. He returned to the hotel with an unconfessed hope. Also it was an ungratified hope. Neither before nor after luncheon did he encounter any object of interest. Finally he wandered away and aimlessly followed a winding

trail to a grassy shelf on the mountain-side. Charmed by the spacious view, he sat down to rest. It was warm and he heard domestic music of birds in the foliage above. Presently he fell asleep.

It was near sunset when he returned. Already the piazza was dotted with guests freshened for dinner. He found Mrs. Bradley where she had sat the night before. She was neither embroidering nor reading. As before, she seemed to find sufficient interest in the landscape. The sun still shone on the mountain-tops, though it had long since left the valley.

"It's been a perfect day," she said with a nod of welcome as he stood beside her.

"Not altogether," he replied, helping himself to a seat.

"Was n't the fishing good?"

"Fairly good. How did you spend the day?"

"In doing nothing. That is what I came here for."

"But how can you manage it with so many human gnats around?"

"I don't," she said. "I go away."

"Show me the place. I came to rest, too."

"But there are times when I dislike to talk," she explained.

"There are times when I crave silence," he rejoined.

She smiled, again the smile that was like the flicker of reflected amusement.

"If you are admitted, the privilege may be revoked."

"As to that, I place my resignation in your hands before election to membership. Am I elected, then?"

"You may come," she said, "to-morrow morning."

The appearance of the Prescotts prevented expression of gratitude. Then dinner came and the Prescotts led him into captivity at bridge. But he managed to see her for a moment, as she crossed the parlor while his partner was playing a hand.

"At what time shall I report?" he asked.

"After breakfast. Would nine o'clock be too early?"

"Make it sunrise, if you'll be so kind."

"You'd be dreadfully bored before luncheon," she said judicially. "You are ordered to take a book. I always do."

"The commander's order is law. But I don't think," he ventured, "I shall need the book."

She did not answer, save by a questioning look, as a call of "Deserter!" from the card table took him away. He slept well and dreamlessly that night. When the sun shining in his eyes awakened him, his watch assured him it was nearly eight. She was at breakfast before him, and they exchanged nods. Though it was only a careless salute, it warmed him with a feeling of intimacy. When she rose from the table he discreetly hastened to join her.

"My book," he said, exhibiting Pater. "What else?"

"Nothing, but we must hurry. An early start is

salvation. Thus far I've only been discovered by a cow. And she was so mild I was n't afraid."

They set out briskly, and the vigorous air moved them to quicken their pace. There was dew on the grass, with little cobwebs of silver. Even the distant mountains were sharply defined. Unseen birds sang with careless energy. All nature was keyed high. Over a stile they went and across a valley. They skirted a ledge and climbed a steep hillside. She took it without faltering, though she did not disdain an occasional helping hand. The first time he took her arm to steady her Strong was conscious of a queer sensation. The tactual impression was somehow registered in his heart. He had it again and again. It pierced him deliciously.

At the top of the hill was a plateau fringed with trees. As they gained it she said, "This way," and turned to the right sharply. He followed her around a burly boulder and a great panorama was unfolded before them. It was as if nature had planned a superb view and provided an observation platform. There was a valley deep and wide, and through it ran a lazy, crooked river, a thread of water in the distance. The slopes of the valley were grandly undulant and richly wooded. The first frosts had painted the tree-tops. Here and there patches of red, with a more general sprinkling of yellow and browns that would darken. The background was still green. And they looked beyond to peaks still wreathed in morning mist. For human touch a few

farmhouses widely scattered in the uplands. Clouds like carded wool floated in the blue.

"How beautiful," he said after a long look.

"I thought you would like it."

Neither deemed it necessary to laud nature. With their backs braced by a shelving rock they sat in tranquil enjoyment of the scene. A few times a squirrel barked above them, and once a freight train puffed up the valley, its line of progress marked by a long trail of blackish smoke. The clouds spread and thickened slightly. It was bright still, but with a light haze.

Afterward Strong could not recall much they said. Almost at once they had fallen into the pleasant habit of random observation that takes understanding for granted. What one feels is as much disclosed by what one does not say as by thoughts uttered.

"Have I passed?" he asked as they approached the hotel in leisurely return.

She smiled at his humility, with sudden warmth he had not seen in her face before. "It has been a pleasant morning to me," she said.

"Then I may come to-morrow?" he pursued.

"If you wish."

"I'll be on hand," he said promptly, — "with my book."

Afterward he wondered if he had seemed unduly eager, too presuming on trifling acquaintance. But he felt as if he had known her always. He pondered that impression more than once in the days that

followed. No other woman had ever been so companionable. It was not that she was self-effacing. She did not treat him as a lord of creation. She had individuality so definite it compelled instinctive respect. She was never restless, never irritable. He had known women that were calm because they were intellectually sterile and emotionally cold, and others whose superficial serenity affected one as might a promenade over a powder magazine. Of Mrs. Bradley he had an impression, when he came to analyze it, of disciplined feeling and strong poise. She was a woman who might both soothe and stimulate. Why was he sure of this? He had never tried to probe what lay behind the curtains of her eyes.

Matters of serious import had been little mentioned between them. One morning, however, he learned what she thought of divorce. It came about through careless mention of a woman who accumulated three husbands before the age of forty.

"Her heart," he suggested, "must be like a receiving tomb."

"Such examples are shocking," she said with heat that surprised him.

"Don't you believe in divorce at all?" he asked.

"Not for the sake of re-marriage."

"But marriage is a contract," he urged. "Why should n't it be dissolved, if either party fails in it?"

"Because it is more than a contract. It has bound up with it all that connects us with the divine."

"That may be true," he conceded, "when marriage is what it ought to be. And how often does that happen?"

Unaccustomed color came to her cheek. She seemed to shrink a little at his question, but stuck to her guns.

"I admit that sad mistakes — mistakes dreadful in their consequences — are made. But I think the individual must suffer for the good of society."

"How is society better off?" he pressed. "I know something of social conditions in countries where divorce is difficult to obtain, almost impossible for a woman. And their moral standards are decidedly lower than the standard of this country, where courts rectify matrimonial errors with gratifying dispatch."

She was silent for a moment, and he noted the tension of her tightly clasped fingers. Then she relaxed, with a little shake of her head.

"You out-argue me," she said. "I wish I could better put into words what I feel."

"Please excuse my persistence," he said penitently. "I don't care much for arguments, they're so apt to turn into squabbles. Anyway, this thing has no personal interest for us."

She accepted his apology and suggestion in silence. Conversation was directed into another channel. After luncheon he did not see her, and she was not in her favorite spot when he returned from a solitary tramp. Feeling somehow depressed, he

went in to dinner alone. She was not in her place. The dining-room was crowded, for it was Saturday night, but it seemed, for all its sparkle and chatter, a singularly cheerless place. He cut his dinner short, preferring solitude outside. A cigar lacked the usual after-dinner flavor, but smoking and walking furnished some outlet for restless energy. There were other smokers on the piazza, week-enders, drawn by wife or sweetheart. Some he picked out by the white dress of their companions, as they strolled to and fro. Others walked alone, as he did. Passing two men lounging against the railing, he heard the name of "Bradley." Without intending to play the eavesdropper he stopped, taking a survey of the sky.

"Bradley came up to-night," said one.

"What for, I wonder," remarked his companion.

"Just to annoy his wife, perhaps," hazarded the first speaker.

Strong felt he ought to go, but could not move. His feet seemed fastened to the spot.

"It's singular how he's gone to the devil," one of the men resumed. "He was a promising enough fellow, but now his future is behind him. He spends more time in gambling-houses than in his law office, and ladies of pleasure see more of him than his wife does."

"What makes her stand it?" queried the other.

"Don't know. Pride, I guess, and straight-laced ideas about divorce. I used to know her when I was

a youngster. She was a ripping fine girl. I was sorry when I saw her at the station to meet him to-night. She can't care for him after the way he has behaved."

"Lots of queer mixups," his friend generalized as he threw his cigar away. His companion followed suit.

Strong's motor muscles again responded to his will. He moved a sedate figure, but there was tumult in his soul. Mrs. Bradley was not a widow. She was tied to a brute, and she was very unhappy. He felt sure of it. A word, a look, what passed for trifles now assumed significance. And she did not believe in divorce. What was it he had said of divorce?—"Anyway, this thing has no personal interest for us." It had all the interest in the world.

He did not at first consider whether she cared for him. He was absorbed in what he felt for her. Love came to him not as Cupid, the chubby archer, but as passion that shook him like a strong wind. Fate had postponed his hour, but it had not passed him by. He clenched his hands for control, while his heart hammered furiously and he trembled in fiery, inarticulate protest. His blood grew cooler, but jealousy tore his breast. He learned the feeling of outrage in thwarted possessive instinct. And afterward came the unreasoning resentment of hurt love. Why had she not told him? Why had she suffered him to love her so? Where was the sweet genuineness, the tender sympathy he had revered in her? There was a terrible mistake.

He shrank from a word, a look, any contact. But pride stiffened his will. The guests were dancing, and flirting, and card-playing now. He entered the parlor aimlessly, since he must go somewhere, and was at once entreated to complete a table at bridge. Nobody seemed to note anything peculiar in his appearance. He played recklessly and successfully.

"I thought you were conservative, Mr. Strong," his partner said beamingly, "and you play SUCH a dashing game."

When he no longer heard the orchestra he knew it was late, and that the majority of guests were dispersing for the night. On a plea of engagement he made his escape. Not to see her, though only for a moment, would be showing the white feather. He thought he had fair control of himself now. At a distance he recognized her as one of a group that included the Prescotts and a strange man. She raised her eyes as he approached and greeted him with a smile.

"Where have you kept yourself this evening, Mr. Strong? I want you to meet my husband."

"I have been playing bridge," he said briefly, and extended to the stranger the hand with which he ached to strike. "Husband," she had said. So this was the man who possessed her. He had an insolent air, with marks of good-breeding persisting in spite of signs of life in the trough. He was handsome still in a blond way, with thick brown hair and blue eyes that habitually mocked. A mustache did not alto-

gether hide certain ugly lines about his mouth. A man would have hesitated to trust him. A woman might easily have loved him.

"Very glad to meet you," he said indifferently, and carelessly gave Strong his hand.

Conversation that followed was lightly general and brief. It came to an end when Bradley yawned and looked at his watch, remarking, "Beastly railroad service in New England. I'm tired out with the trip."

The Prescotts took the hint, and Strong of necessity with them. As they moved away, a glance over his shoulder showed Mrs. Bradley and her master ascending the stairs. He sought the piazza again. It was more agreeable, being deserted. Feverishly his mind fell upon the scene just past. Her color had been more pronounced than usual and her manner lighter. Her smile had been frequent, and once he saw her rest her hand for a moment on Bradley's arm. Her "Husband!" Could it be possible that she had still a spark of affection for this man whose face bore the stamp of sensual indulgence? Pain wrung his heart.

The night was cool and clear, but somehow it was hard to breathe. He stepped down to the dew-drenched lawn and stood for a moment irresolute. His fretted nerves craved action. By force of habit he set out in the direction of their mountain retreat. He passed the stile and breasted a steep slope bordered with trees. There he paused. Distraught as he

was, he realized he could never find that shelf over the far-off valley in the dark. Then he could not bear to leave her behind, though he could not be near her.

The hotel was still in sight, a dark hulk save here and there a luminous spot denoting one who lingered late. He knew her room well, and marked the light. It was unquestionably hers, the top story to the right of the tower. His chin in his hands, he sat upon a boulder, his eyes fixed on that point of light in the blackness. It meant so much.

It had grown cold, but he did not heed it. Overhead the clear sky was of that complexion neither black nor blue, but somehow suggesting both. And it was quilted with stars that blazed fiercely as jewels bedecking some savage beauty. They were like eyes that sparkled, and sometimes a strange radiance threaded the heavens. But Strong saw none of these wonders. His eyes were fastened upon the light, the only one left in upper stories of the hotel. He blindly clung to it, as one storm-tossed and far from shore. When it was extinguished he still sat motionless, staring into the dark. Devils with their pincers made merry with his flesh.

He did not know the hour when he rose painfully, stiff and cold, and made his way slowly down to the hotel. The office was quite dark. A sleepy bell-boy, the only person visible, eyed him curiously as he began laboriously climbing the stairs. There was no spring in his legs, no clarity in his mind. He felt

dull and shrunken and old. He only wanted to sleep. Any oblivion, better transient than none at all.

When he awoke the sun was high. But there was no sound in the hotel. Though he had slumbered heavily, he was little refreshed. His eyelids were like lead, and his eyes burned. A hand lifted to his head was curiously heavy, almost a dead weight. It was painful to move, but more painful to face the thought of a day cooped up with thoughts that flocked like vultures. Slowly, since neither hand nor foot was very obedient, he dressed and left the hotel.

Once abroad, he sought to accelerate his pace, as if speed meant relief. In a measure it did, for the mere exertion of keeping in motion somewhat occupied his mind. And still he followed the path over the stile and up the slope, the path to the valley. That at least had been theirs alone. Would he feel communion still? He tried to hurry, but he stumbled sadly. The shelf above the valley was very distant. When he reached it at last he was exhausted.

It was a morning much like the one on which he first beheld the valley. But how different now. There was no uplift in the mountains, no happy tenderness quickening appreciation of splendor in the landscape unrolled. Each memory stabbed him afresh, as a staccato touch in dull, grinding pain. Sometimes there were tears in his eyes, and they fell unheeded.

After a while nature gave him passing peace. When he returned to consciousness it was past noon.

No food nor anything to drink had passed his lips since evening of the day before. An outraged body asserted its suffering, but he gave it little heed. It was past years that he thought of. Inexorable memory reviewed the women who had loved him to their sorrow. He had been blind. He had not understood. But how had that helped them? Was love brought upon him as a penalty? Perhaps they were revenged by Fate.

By and by, he rose painfully and began the long trip to the hotel. It was even harder than in the morning, for he was quite weak now. The sun had set when he somewhat unsteadily crossed the lawn. Fortunately, he met no one he knew on the way to his room. A meal served there he ate ravenously. Soon after drowsiness assailed him irresistibly.

In the morning natural stability of judgment asserted the claim of routine. He could not avoid people forever. He turned to the mirror curiously, wondering if he were much changed. His eyes were somewhat bloodshot, and there was blue beneath them. He was unquestionably pale, and there were minor discolorations somehow received. Altogether, not very startling. He made his toilet with customary care and went down to breakfast. There were few about, for Monday morning pilgrims had been speeded on their dolorous journey.

When he had finished breakfast, he went to the usual spot. He did not expect to find her, but she was there, with her habitual air of detachment.

Hearing his step, she turned, and her eyes flashed quick concern.

"What is the matter?" In her voice was anxious interest.

"What do you mean?" he replied, refusing to understand.

"You look badly."

"I've had rather a hard time," he said heavily, and fell to staring at his boots.

She gave him a look troubled and sympathetic, but pressed inquiry no further.

After a little he said, "Would you like to take a walk?"

"I don't feel much like it this morning," she demurred.

"A little way, then," he persisted.

"Very well," she conceded, and they set out slowly, walking in silence. They had not proceeded far when she paused.

"Let us sit here," she suggested, "under this tree."

He seated himself without speaking and began pulling blades of grass. Then he shot at her a sudden question: "Why did n't you tell me?"

"What?" she asked.

"That you were married."

"I thought you knew."

"How?" he asked. His voice was strained.

"You came with the Prescotts, and I have known Edith Prescott since I was in school."

"She never told me. I suppose she thought I was bullet proof."

"I am very sorry," she said softly. There were tears in her eyes.

There is no curiosity so pitiless as that of Love.

"You must have known I cared," he asserted presently.

"Forgive me," she said. "I did not realize how much."

"But you care for me."

She did not reply, but flushed under his eyes. He tried to wrest his answer from her.

"Don't you?" he challenged.

"You have no right to ask me," she said without flinching.

"I must know," he insisted.

"I have no right to tell you."

"Would you come to me, if you were free?"

He flung it at her desperately, and thought he saw a melting moment in her eyes. When she spoke it was in entreaty.

"Won't you be a little kind to me?"

In that moment she disarmed him.

"I'll try," he said; and added with a rueful smile: "I'm afraid, though, it will have to be from a distance."

He rose as he spoke.

"I wonder," he asked, "if you will give me your four-leaved clover?"

"With my heart's best wishes."

He took it from her open palm and pressed it to his lips.

"Thank you, dear. You don't mind my calling you that once, do you?"

"No," she answered, and her voice was tender.

"Good-bye," he said, when they reached the hotel. "I'm off at noon."

Her eyes looked more than her lips would utter.

"I want you to know," she said gravely, "that it has made me happier to know you."

"Thanks," he said huskily, and turned away abruptly. Once he looked back. She was where he had left her, following him with her eyes.

His exit from Kinteco was commonplace enough, save in the hope that he left behind. But had he left it behind? On the long journey to New York he turned and twisted the all-important question. Finally he abandoned it through sheer fatigue.

It grew dark, and from the flying landscape he turned to the press. He thumbed the pages idly. What was at the theater? This and that musical comedy, the "great American drama," and so on. And the Philharmonic was playing that night. He noted the programme, mostly Wagner, winding up with "The Dead March" from "Götterdämmerung." Slansky conducted that in broad style. If the train arrived on time, he might be able to hear it.

The train entered the city and thundered on to the station. Almost in the appointed minute the

giant engine came to rest with a long sigh. Strong surrendered himself to the nearest taxi pirate.

"See how soon you can get to Carnegie," he said.

He arrived somewhat shaken but content. He was in season for "*Götterdämmerung*." He sought a seat in the gallery. The "March" would be better where music was really loved.

When Slansky raised his baton he closed his eyes and waited. Already in his heart something presaged comfort, a crumb of peace. The thundering chords swept round Siegfried's bier. He heard the far tread of the mighty dead. Their footfalls were quiet, yet they moved exultant. Captains of legions, popes and kings, mighty heads that had worn the crown. And there were those hedged about by the divinity of genius, its seal upon their brow. Banners gleamed in the sun and he heard afar the echoing call of triumphant bugles. It was not Death this army came to. It had found Life at last.

Still that vast harmony. It buoyed him as the sea. Now there came from the hereafter those he had lately feared. There was Kitty Engel, her plain face strangely beautiful, and Eleanor, and Mrs. Ormsby. They were as individual as in life, yet related in the wonder of eternal peace. They did not speak, but he read their eyes. What he saw was not forgiveness, but love.

On and on went the march in superb solemnity. When it died away, Strong knew what had been sealed before. Love was service, the hope that

redeemed humanity. He felt inexpressibly tender. There was no loneliness in solitude with this new fragrance in his soul.

The rooms he had dreaded greeted him in each familiar object. He sought to ward off sleep, it was such precious peace. The next day found him still armed with composure. There was no question what to do. He must go about the business of life. Only he first bought and dispatched a silver four-leaved clover.

To the woman who had denied him his heart went out in longing. But he felt no bitterness. He had received a great gift. And with happiness comes hope.

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